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# OLD MEMORIES.

A NOVEL.

BY

JULIA MELVILLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

"I think we are not wholly brain,  
Magnetic mockeries."

IN MEMORIAM.

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## OLD MEMORIES.

### CHAPTER I.

WHETHER some mysterious foreshadowing of what was coming oppressed me, as I went slowly and wearily up stairs, I cannot tell, but the feelings that came over me were strange—almost unearthly. Weary as I was, I felt an unaccountable reluctance to go to bed, and instead of going at once to my room, turned, by some vague impulse, down the broad passage where Charles's room was, and which was lighted by a large window at the end. I walked to this

window, and leaning my forehead against the pane, looked out on the white ghastly moon over which broken masses of black clouds were flying before a shrill moaning wind.

It was owing, I suppose, to my weariness and weak state of bodily health, but all kinds of wild unearthly fancies took possession of my brain, and swept over me like a menacing tempest.

Before I had gazed long at that ghastly moon and tossing clouds, a strange sense of loneliness and terror fell upon me; I thought I heard spirit whispers in the wailing wind, that from amidst the swaying boughs that darkened the windows, I saw Frank's face pass forth, white, emaciated, dying, turning on me a look of strange agonising reproach.

In an indescribable state of nervous terror and excitement, I tore myself from the window, and the unearthly influences that tossed and moaned without, and longing restlessly for a familiar step or a friendly voice, hurried down the passage with quivering limbs and wildly beating heart,

when, as I passed Charles's door, a faint groan arrested me.

There was something so distressful in the sound that it drove away my shadowy terrors, and recalled me to present realities. He might be ill, and needing assistance. I knocked softly at the door.

At first there was no answer, but on my repeating the knock and asking if he were ill, he crossed the room, unlocked it, and stood before me.

He was dressed, though the little old fashioned clock on the chimney-piece pointed to three; and how ill he looked, with a hot, hectic flush on his white cheek, and the strange feverish light of restless excitement in his large, languid eyes. I looked at him in terror.

"Not in bed yet, Charlie? Why, it is three in the morning; why will you sit up so late? I am sure it must injure you, and how ill you look," taking his unresisting hand that burned with fever, "can I do nothing for you."

“Yes, everything on earth,” he answered, speaking with restless agitation: “my life is in your hands.”

He poured out a glass of water from a decanter that stood on the table, and drinking it at one draught, as if to quench the feverish thirst that consumed it, threw himself into the arm-chair by the fire, and leant his head on his hands.

I saw that the hearth and fender were littered with torn up scraps of writing. I felt such pity for him, alone suffering and restless for so many lonely hours, that I could not bear to leave him just then. So I bent over his chair, and wondering sorrowfully at the feverish, almost unearthly beauty of his worn spiritual features, whispered all the kind comforting words I could think of, forgetting my own weariness in my sorrow for him.

“You must wonder how I came here at this unnatural hour, Charlie. We have only just returned from Mrs. Selwyn’s, and instead of going to bed like a sober mortal, I was gazing

at the moon from the passage window outside, and then, as I passed your door, I thought I heard you moan. You really deserve no end of scolding for sitting up so late—what would Aunt Mary say if she knew of your delinquencies—and why won't you take more care of the health we all value so much?"

"Who values it?" he asked despondingly.

"That is an ungrateful question, Charlie, loved and cared for as you are."

"I know it is—God forgive me!" he rather sighed than spoke. "But I am not ungrateful for your kindness, Nell, sweet, gentle creature as you are; whose unselfish tenderness and beauty are the sole gladders of my unhappy life. Nell, you are my evening star."

I shrank back half frightened at the passionate warmth with which he spoke—I almost thought him delirious.

He rose from his chair and stood before me, his eyes gleaming and his cheeks flushed with a wild, excited earnestness.



“Charles, Charles, I entreat you to be calm, I—I don’t understand you.”

“Because you will not; because for long weary months, years, you have wilfully shut your eyes to the secret that has been consuming me—my long, hopeless, unheeded love for you. Helen, angel of my weary life: is it a wonder and a horror, or why do you look at me with that white, frightened face? It may be, it is, presumptuous, hopeless, but think mercifully of it, pity if you will do no more. Is it my inexorable doom that you cannot love me? When in intense suffering, you have laid your hand on my forehead, and whispered your sweet words of encouragement, I would not have exchanged my shattered frame for the strongest and fairest that ever trod earth’s surface, your voice has rekindled life and hope within me. But you did not know this, Helen, or you would have shunned me, and I who ought to have told you my unhappy secret long ago, could not bear to lose the tenderness that seemed necessary to my life. Now you know it, and I



read my fate in your face, as you stand there white and statue-like, looking at me with those eyes of speechless dismay. You cannot love me—how should you? and I despise myself for my selfishness: but speak to me, for the love of mercy.”

Utterly exhausted by the violent excitement that consumed him like a flame, he threw himself on the sofa, and burying his head in the cushions, waited breathlessly for the answer on which his life seemed to hang.

I don't know what words I said, in my grief, and pity, and terror, I only remember weeping with an agony that I had never known before, even in the greatest trial of my life, telling him in the gentlest, kindest words I could think of, that he was very dear to me, that I loved him as my brother, and should ever do so: but that all other love was buried in Frank's grave, that even speaking of it seemed an outrage to his memory.

I think, as far as I know, in my grief, and

distress, and confusion, that this was the substance of what I said, and he heard it in silence—a silence that amid that deep night stillness, terrified me inexpressibly. In an agony of self-reproach and wretchedness, I knelt beside the sofa, pushed back the brown wavy curls from his forehead, where a cold dampness had succeeded to fever, implored him to look up, to listen to me, used in my distraction every tender and beseeching word that occurred to me, but in vain for a long while.

At last he said faintly, “I have my answer; it is a fit one, Helen. Forgive me for wishing to doom you to the life of a sick nurse—as my wife would be.”

He rose from the sofa, though the most death-like pallor had taken the place of his hectic colour, and he looked sinking with exhaustion, and said in a tone strangely calm, holding out his hand to me, “Leave me now, Helen, and again God bless you! It is four o’clock; you must be tired to death. You will forgive me, darling—be-

loved of my life? let me call you so once more."

His voice faltered and sunk, and in the keenness of my self-reproach, I clung to him while he held me to his heart, and wept as though my own would break.

"Oh! Charles, my dear, dear brother, it is me you have to forgive! Tell me that I have not spoken unkindly, that I have not wounded you, that we shall be henceforth as we always have been?"

"No, no, dearest, you are always good and gentle—but—but leave me now, Nell, for the love of Heaven!"

I tore myself away, terrified to leave him alone, and yet not daring to stay, and hurried out, and then by an irresistible impulse, I stopped outside the door to listen fearfully, and heard the deep, strong convulsive sobs, wrung by intense wretchedness from the proud heart of man. And then I fled to my own room, and falling on my knees and burying my

face in the bed-clothes, prayed wildly that God would pity me and let me die—one of those frantic prayers springing from the desperation of sorrow that He is too merciful to answer.

I threw myself on the bed in the darkness (for the fire, all save a few glimmering embers, had gone out), and pressing my hands over my eyes, tried to shut out all consciousness of outward things, all recollection of what had happened, but no strivings would keep out the spectre of that pale, suffering, despairing face. The room was haunted by it. I sprang up in terror, and going out, with no definite purpose but that of flying from my sick imagination and nameless terrors, wandered in the restlessness of my remorse like a ghost up and down the passages and stairs of the old house, in the thick gloom and oppressive night silence, while the flying glimpses of the cold moon streamed in ghastly mockery on my white ball-dress, and the roses in my hair, and the wind went by in long rushing sighs, like the lamentation of lost

souls. Up and down—the vague, purposeless, terror-stricken wanderings of a perturbed spirit, till so desperately weary and utterly heart-sick, that I thought I must have dropped on the stairs and there laid till morning, or till I died, when a step above roused all my senses to a state of breathless expectant fright. A quick running step, and Aunt Mary came flying down the stairs I was just trying to mount, in her dressing-gown and with a light in her hand, which showed me her face full of white terror. She recoiled and shrieked as I grasped her clothes, almost taking me in my white dress and whiter face for a spirit.

“Helen! good heavens: how came you here?”

“Speak to me, tell me what it is,” I gasped.

“Charles is dying, I think. Go to your room, my dear child—will you wake Steenie for me? God be merciful to us,” and she hurried on breathlessly to rouse the man-servant, while I, gaining strength, from the very agony of excitement, flew up-stairs to awake Steenie. But he

was up already; the whole house was roused, Maude and Jessie standing in their night dresses, with pale, frightened faces at the door of their room, asking in anxious bewilderment what the matter was. Peggy running to and fro with dismal bewailings; Uncle Edward shouting out inquiries and directions from his room during the progress of dressing.

But all powers of life seemed to be deserting me, just when they most were needed, and Maude and Jessie's cry of fright and amazement at my strange dress and ghastly looks, sounded faint and indistinct in my ears. I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more, till I awoke to see Maude and Peggy looking at me with sorrowful eyes, and to find that it was the next day, and that all that had happened was not a vision of the night, as I vaguely hoped it might be. I shrank wearily from their looks, and hid my face in the pillow, hearing Peggy whisper "Ah! poor dear, there's more sorrow for her. I think she loved that poor



dear lad, and I'm sure he loved her pretty hard, for he's been asking for her at a rate that's enough to move a stone, for all he's not sensible, bless his sweet face."

"Hush, Peggy, you'll vex her; I hear mamma calling you," and Peggy went out, rubbing her eyes, and Maude and I were left alone. I feared to speak to her, some indefinable guilty feeling, as though she must know me to be the cause of her brother's peril, held me silent, till her loving kiss on my forehead, and gentle stroking back of my hair, told me, that as yet, she knew nothing.

"Maude," I said, tremblingly breaking the silence of the room.

"Darling!" she returned, her sweet childish voice faltering sorrowfully.

"Tell me ——" I could only say these two words, holding out my hands beseechingly towards her.

"Poor Charlie is very ill—in great danger," her tears rushed out here, "unless a great change takes place soon, there is little hope of his re-

covery. Dr. Stirling wishes for more advice, and we have written to Dr. Twynford from London."

There was a quiet despair in the usually clear joyous voice inexpressibly sad to hear.

"His sufferings are so terrible that we all fear his constitution is not strong enough to endure them. He is delirious now. Was it not strange—this sudden illness? Mamma felt uneasy about him, and went to his room to see if he were asleep this morning between five and six, about two hours after we returned from Mrs. Selwyn's, and found him still dressed (was not that extraordinary at such an hour?), but dreadfully ill. Dr. Stirling says he must have had some very severe mental shock—what could it be?" looking at me with her troubled blue eyes, in which, but that might have been my remorseful fancy, I thought I saw a sad suspicion.

"Last night was full of mysteries, Nell; even now it seems to me like a wild, terrible dream. Jessie and I had been talking in bed over the



party, and had just fallen asleep, when we were awoke by mamma's terrified voice, calling out to Steenie to get up, for Charles was dying—wasn't it a horrible awakening? And how came you, Nell, to be wandering about the house in your ball dress? were you walking in your sleep, poor dear? Dearest, don't turn away your face from me in that sad way, I didn't mean to worry you, but it seemed so strange; and oh! Nelly, won't it be dreadful to lose Charles, my dear, beautiful, patient brother, whom we all love so! How shall we live without his sweet voice, and his blue eyes?" and then came a burst of passionate sorrow.

"Maude, Maude, pity me! don't cry so." In the desperation of my self-reproachful misery I sprang from the bed and fell on my knees before her. "No grief can be like mine, for if he dies I have killed him. Oh! Maude, don't hate me—he told me last night that he loved me, and I refused his love, kindly if you will, but still refused it. If I had but known it long

ago—but I never did, never dreamt it, though now it seems plain, and as I look back I wonder at my blindness. But, Maude, I always loved him as a brother; and—and my heart is in Frank's grave and what could I say."

I could say no more then for my rushing tears, but Maude did not chide me, nor utter one reproachful word. No, my own sweet, loving hearted sister, you felt and understood the sore strait in which my woman's nature, my woman's faith had stood, and only twined your arms round me, and supporting my weary head on my bosom, let us weep together, and how bitter were my tears of remorseful, unavailing regret, God only knew!

I don't know what dreary time I wept, kneeling on the floor, with Maude's arms around me; but we were roused by hearing Dr. Stirling's heavy step slowly descending the staircase, and Maude entreated me to dry my eyes and run down after him, and ask what he thought of Charles.

"He will tell you sooner than me, for he

thinks me a child, and always tells me so crossly not to ask questions, so run, Nell dear, and find it all out. There, I have dried all traces of tears from your sweet pale face, now go, and God bless you."

I hastened down to the drawing-room, where Dr. Stirling was standing before the fire and staring very hard at it, with a hopelessly gloomy and perplexed face. Was Charles's doom written there? I thought fearfully.

He turned and faced me as I entered, drawing his black brows into a portentous scowl.

"Well, madam, and what have you to say?" demanded he gruffly.

"Charles?" was all I could answer.

"Well, if you particularly wish to know how he is," returned he, with an air of gloomy triumph, "I'll just tell you—as an especial favour mind—that he is as bad as he can be."

"You don't really think so?"

Whether my voice of distress, or my white face and attitude of motionless misery touched

him, I cannot tell, but he left off nodding ferociously at the fire, and said in a softened tone, facing me again:

“If I didn’t really think so, young lady, I’ve a notion I shouldn’t say it. It’s not my system to frighten people. Unless this Brook Street gentleman, that’s been written for”—Dr. Stirling could not suppress a little professional jealousy in speaking of his London brother—“is an uncommonly clever chap, which, I hope to Heaven, he may be; why—” He finished the sentence by taking a pinch of snuff, and then blowing his nose very hard to hide the emotion that twinkled in his eyes.

“Is there no hope?” I asked, despairingly.

He turned upon me with that fidgetty irritation, which, at another time, would have made me smile. “Oh, lassie, this is your work!” rubbing his hair upright with both hands—his usual fashion when excited. “You stand before me now innocent enough, with your white face and tearful eyes, but it’s your work, and you

know it." And I felt he was right, and had no answer but my tears. "Long ago," he went on, still rubbing away remorselessly at his head, "I saw you had turned that unlucky lad's brain with your soft voice and your black eyes—though you're no beauty mind—and so did his mother, I fancy, and everybody that wasn't a fool; and I'd have warned you of what the end would be, if I had not been sure you'd laughed in my face, for what woman was ever stopped in her game till she had played it out? And now, I suppose, when the poor fellow found courage to tell you what a fool you had made of him, you snubbed him, as all your sex serve the poor devils they entrap, and then get tired of, as Carry Ramsbottom served me, and as a hundred other Carries would have done after her, if I had not been up to their tricks, and given the sex a cold shoulder for the rest of my life. Woman was a mistake in the creation, her part is to make a bedevilment of the world generally, and to entrap, and humbug, and muddle, and

mystify, and twiddle round her impudent little fingers, the nobler animal—man.” The doctor blew his nose fiercely, and waxed red in the face, for he was growing excited on this, his favourite subject, of female wickedness. “He lets all his secrets out now, poor lad, for he’s as light-headed as the weather-cock on the church steeple; and there’s that confounded little name of yours—that two syllables should turn a man’s noddle in that manner—for ever on his lips. Ay, you may cry and sob now as much as you like, but what the devil use is an ocean of tears? When he’s dead, may be you’ll repent of the tricks you’ve played; and there’s precious little use in his living, as I see, a life of continual disappointment, and bodily pain, and mental wretchedness. Why, if it wasn’t for his mother—I can’t get her eyes out of my head—it would be a merciful action to let him die.”

“Oh, no, no! save him—save him, for my sake!”

I believe, in the agony of my grief and alarm,



I seized his rough, brown, knotty hand, and kissed it imploringly, as though on it depended Charles' fate.

"Well, well!" he coughed and rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. "Don't make a fool of me, and—and we'll try all we can. All that human skill—all that the medical profession (the first in the world!) can do, shall be done, and—God's mercies are great, child—and—there, there, that'll do."

And so, making vigorous efforts to clear his throat, and blowing his nose harder than ever, he trudged away, and I watched him across the lawn, and down the avenue, till he was lost in the mist, with the vacant glance of hopeless weakness and wretchedness.

I could not go back to Maude with what I had heard, and so I threw myself on the sofa, and hiding my head, gave myself up to my sorrow. Hurried footsteps passed overhead, and up and down the stairs, but no one came near the drawing-room.

I felt cut off from their love and sympathy—an outcast, who in return for all the blessings of home, affection, care, they had given to me, the homeless daughter of shame, had brought only sorrow on their heads. I could not love him, poor, poor fellow—as he deserved; my heart, with its first bright dreams and clinging memories, lay in the grave at Waterloo, but I might have married him. I might have been a kind, faithful, tender wife; might have soothed his rough and weary road, and won my reward in his strong affection and earnest gratitude! Would not Frank's spirit have looked mercifully on such a deed as this? Could I sacrifice nothing, not even the faded memories of the irrevocable past, for the son of her, who had been the guardian angel of my life—my more than mother—who gave me the refused, fostering love and care, by her who bore me—who had saved me from a life of sorrow and shame, taken me to her bosom, the child of grief and guilt, and loved me as her own?

If he died how should I brave his mother's



and sister's wailing; how dwell in the old house, haunted by his ghost, of which every stone would seem to cry out reproachfully that I might have saved him, and would not? And thus I lay, till the darkening mist of evening closed over me, and the red fire-light struggled with the long ghostly shadows, quivering on the walls and ceiling, crying in a passion of self-upbraiding sorrow, faltering out broken prayers to God for Charles's life, that I might repair the evil I had done.

## CHAPTER II.

THE prayer was not granted yet. Day after day flowed heavily away; the sun rose and set, and we prayed, and watched, and waited, but the frail life round which so many heart-strings were twined, trembled on the brink of the great unknown sea; the young spirit struggled and shuddered helplessly in the ghastly shadows of the dark valley.

Dr. Twynford had come down from London, and was domiciled in the house, the same cool, quaint, courteous, unruffled gentleman as ever, with the same faultlessly powdered hair and shining boots, and gold snuff-box, answering all

the anxious appeals and breathless questions put to him with his invariable air of composed and deliberate condescension, and treating Peggy with such grave politeness that she retreated from the sick room in baffled dismay, any unusual civility always covering her with indescribable confusion.

Honest Dr. Stirling was wonderfully impressed by the elaborate manners, and the boots, and the powder, and the watch-chain, and the suavity, of his London compatriot, and after the first consultation came down stairs with a face of solemn importance, and announced to Uncle Edward his high opinion of his new associate, that he was a clever fellow, Sir—a man of the world—a practical, sensible, talented member of the first profession in the universe—that you've done a wise thing, Sir, in sending for such a man—that we agree on every point, like brothers—and that now there's every reason to hope, by the blessing of Providence, that we shall quell the enemy, and come off conquerors, Sir—conquerors! And Dr. Stirling smote his old hat with an air of antici-

pated triumph. and taking up his umbrella departed, chuckling felicitously.

But the enemy was a strong and virulent spirit, and not easily to be overcome, and though Death and the doctors fought it out fiercely over their prostrate victim, the strife was long and hot, and doubtful, and the victory day after day uncertain as ever.

And the blank gloom and silence of the house, the stealthy footsteps, and melancholy faces were such an insupportable weight to my tortured spirits that these were the darkest hours of my life. And still Charles lay wasting and consuming away with fever and agony, and struggling with the dim, unknown horrors of delirium, and I, who would gladly have given my life for his, could not aid him but by my despairing prayers.

I shrank even from Maude and Steenie's tenderness; the servants' gloomy faces looked reproachful to me, the eager inquiries of the village people whom I met in my restless, objectless wanderings, after "the young master" filled me

with sick remorse. It was at this time, that having occasion to drive into Haverford, I saw my father. We had never looked in each other's faces since the terrible night that I first heard from my mother's lips the story of my shameful birth, and the sight of him woke up all the old intolerable remembrance and a shrinking dread. I was sitting in the carriage at the door of a shop while the servant who drove me had gone in, and my father dismounted and stood by the carriage with his arm upon it, talking volubly, his black eyes on my face.

Business had called him to Haverford, but circumstances with which I was well acquainted, had prevented his coming over to Holmsley to see me. They had an unfortunate prejudice against him there. He was delighted to see me—the daughter from whom adverse fate had divided him. I looked as charming as ever, and and he had no doubt that my mother, could she have foreseen this meeting would have sent me her affectionate love.

I listened to him with a terrified fascination, shrinking, I knew not why, from the influence of his mocking black eyes. From a few words he let fall—some indirect allusion to the annoyance of duns and my mother's extravagance—I thought they were in difficulties, that perhaps the black shadow of ruin was darkening the old house. I thought him strangely altered in person, he looked haggard and thin, his eyes were blood-shot, and his black hair and whiskers, of yore so trim and neat, hung loose and neglected. He was the image of a man over whom the night of a debauched life was closing. I shuddered vaguely, and drew a long, long sigh of relief, when at last he bade me farewell. And all the way home through the grey November evening, I thought of the old desolate home, of the mother who never loved me, sitting alone with her intolerable memories in some haunted chamber, listening perhaps, for the perished echoes of her children's feet!

My hair and dress were damp with the chill



drizzle, when we reached home; I was chilled, weary, and depressed. Steenie came out, and half lifted me from the carriage.

“Welcome home, Nell; what an evening for you to be out so late, poor little woman. Come in to the fire, and pull off this wet shawl, and bring some life into your white cheek.”

“Steenie, you are speaking more cheerfully than usual; is there good news?” I asked breathlessly.

He led me tenderly into the drawing-room, pulled off my wet shawl, and placed me on the sofa by the fire, and whispered “Charlie is better—the fever has taken a turn, and there are hopes of his life; but, hush, hush, Nell! be calm, I entreat you. I wish I had not told you so soon.”

“Oh! thank God, thank God!”

No words might check my passionate, joyful crying, nor smother the rush of intense gratitude that filled my soul. He would live—the insupportable weight of remorseful regret was lifted from my oppressed heart. I need not shrink

guilty from his mother's eyes: he would live—praised be Heaven! and my life was left to repair the evil I had done.

I did not see that Mary and Maude were in the room, talking by the window, till they gathered round me and soothed me with loving eloquence. .

“I was the first,” Mary said, her smile glistening through the tears that yet hung on her long dark eyelashes, “to discover that Charlie was better, that he had turned the corner, as Dr. Stirling says, and that I will maintain, in spite of all the dear old fellow's contempt at the notion of a woman discovering anything. You know that that horrible fever left him two days ago, and that he has been lying ever since in such a state of exhaustion that we could only tell by his low breathing that he lived; but this evening, as I was sitting by him, he opened his eyes—don't you envy my delight—and whispered, so faintly that I could hardly catch the words,



‘Mary, is that you?’ It was hard work, Nell, not to fall on my knees and cry for joy.”

“How I wish it had been me,” said Maude, her blue eyes swimming.

“My father is not come home yet,” said Steenie. “What news it will be for him. Here come our medical celebrities,” as the stately march of the two doctors was heard descending the stairs.

I involuntarily shrank back into the shadow of the corner from Dr. Twynford’s sharp glances, as he advanced towards us, rubbing his hands with his usual courteous smile, in which now, however, I thought I could detect some real and unaffected gladness.

“I rejoice to be the herald of good news,” said he, an honest satisfaction shining through his ordinary dignified urbanity, and starched politeness, “the fever has taken a favourable turn, and we may now really entertain hopes—”

“That he’ll pull through it,” concluded Dr. Stirling, blowing his nose in an enormous yellow

handkerchief, with a deafening report, and rubbing up his stiff hair with both hands, as he approached the fire.

"Precisely," assented Dr. Twynford, taking a delicate pinch of snuff from his gold snuff-box, and then daintily whisking off a few stray grains that had fallen on his spotless shirt-front with a perfumed white cambric.

"It has been a hard trial, however," resumed Dr. Stirling, frowning gloomily at us, and "even now there are no end of dangers to be guarded against; literally no end of 'em—any excitement in particular"—and here he scowled at me—"would be about equivalent to a dose of prussic acid, my good sir?"

"Most indubitably; your experience with regard to Mr. Brotherton's constitution is of much longer standing than mine, but my opinion entirely coincides with yours, as I am bound to state, it has done on most points throughout," said Dr. Twynford, with a grave face. "I shall return to town to-morrow, any longer stay here

being unnecessary, since things have taken so favourable a turn; and I can only say that I shall leave the patient in whom we are so materially interested with perfect confidence in your hands, my good sir, as a highly respectable and a—an experienced, skilful medical practitioner.”

On the receipt of this gratifying intelligence, Dr. Stirling rubbed his hands and nodded triumphantly at us, with a beaming countenance, that said as plainly as countenance could speak: “Here’s a man of sense and discernment for you.”

“The patient is asleep now,” said Dr. Twynford, “and, of course, it is extremely desirable—nay, imperatively necessary—”

“That he shouldn’t be disturbed on any account,” broke in Dr. Stirling, who evidently found a perverse delight in taking the words out of the great man’s mouth, “therefore you’ll be good enough, all of you”—with another impartial scowl all round—“to see that a pin doesn’t

drop all over the house, for if by some confounded mischance, or female imprudence, this vitally important slumber is broken, why the whole College of Surgeons couldn't answer for the consequences."

"Exactly," resumed Dr. Twynford; "it may also be reasonably expected that a favourable change will be discernible in the patient—"

"When he wakes," said Dr. Stirling, adding this by way of triumphant conclusion to his friend's remarks.

"I am so happy and thankful," faltered Maude's sweet childish voice, coming like pretty music after the grave talk to which she had been listening, with blue bewildered eyes.

The great London doctor nodded and smiled good humouredly on her, unbent from his serene dignity by the sweet, simple words. Perhaps he had at home a fair-haired daughter like her, whose voice brought a thrill to his heart, who knows?

"Hark! I think I hear my father coming,"

exclaimed Steenie, running out of the room to meet him.

"What news it will be for him," said Mary the tears shining in her dark eyes. "How grateful we are to you, under God!" looking earnestly up into his serene physiognomy.

"Tut, tut," answered he good humouredly, "I am very glad and grateful myself, I assure you. But I hear your father arriving, and my good friend, Dr. Stirling, totally forgetting the pressing necessity for quiet, is vociferously saluting him with the good news. May I beg of you to go and moderate his excitement."

Mary hurried out into the hall, and Dr. Twynford turned towards me?

"You are so silent in your dark corner, Miss Marsden," he said with his peculiarly quiet smile, "that I am really unable to guess how this news affects you. Pshaw, these are not tears, my dear child," abruptly changing his tone to one of familiar kindness. "Pray dry them, for the sight of a lady's tears affects me as lamentably as any

green school-boy. I have found out your cousin's secret at last," slightly lowering his voice, with a good-humoured nod, "and hope that a few kind words from you will soon efface the remembrance of his sorrows, poor fellow! So the most reasonable advice I can give you is to marry him as soon as he is well enough. Eh? what say you to my prescription?" And without waiting for an answer, he laughed good-naturedly at me, and joined the group at the door surrounding Uncle Edward, in his muddy boots and dripping great coat, and with a joyous incredulity in his broad, handsome face, all in a glow from struggling through the rain.

"So Charlie's better, doctor?" exclaimed he, eagerly grasping Dr. Twynford's hand.

"Yes, my dear Sir, the crisis is over, and I think we may reasonably hope—"

"God be thanked! My poor, dear boy! Mayn't I see him?"

"Not for a mine of gold, my good friend," struck in Dr. Stirling, laying a firm hold on



Uncle •Edward's button. "See him! Prussic acid would be a trifle to it!"

"Well, well, you know best, and so God bless you both," said Uncle Edward hoarsely and wringing both their hands in his hearty gripe, he fairly turned and ran into the library, locking the door after him.

It was not hard to guess what he went there for, and Dr. Stirling blew his nose so hard during the next five minutes, that I thought he must infallibly have blown it all away, while even Dr. Twynford's eyes twinkled a little, and he had constant recourse to his useful snuff-box till Steenie announced that dinner was ready, and that his father begged they would not wait for him.

It was for this dinner that Peggy tortured her brains to devise triumphant dishes, "to let that fine Lunnen chap see that we knowed something"—so that between her grief for Charles, and her anxiety about the viands, the dear old soul had but an uneasy time of it.

Ours was a more cheerful tea to-night than it had been for a weary while, and when Uncle Edward very soon made his appearance from the dining-room, leaving the doctors over their wine and Steenie to entertain them, some irresistible impulse prompted us all at once to run to him, and kiss and cling about him, as if the happy old days were come back again and we were children once more.

Dear Uncle! I think I see him now, after we had all kissed and hugged him, and cried and laughed to our hearts' content, sending Maude upstairs to stay with Charles while Aunt Mary came down, and then sitting in his great chair, while I sat at his feet, and Mary nestled her beautiful head on his shoulder, and clasping both our hands in his in a posture of thanksgiving, spoke with a devout and simple earnestness of the infinite mercies of the Eternal Father, which are "new every morning!" And thus we sat till a quiet familiar tread roused us, and Aunt Mary glided in, and we all rose up to meet her,

even I forgetting the miserable shrinking fears of the past days.

"This is brave news, Mary, my sweet lass," said Uncle Edward, drawing his wife close to his side; "poor thing, thou art worn and pale with fright and watching, sitting up so many weary nights; but God has given thee thy reward. He'll live, Mary."

"Yes, he'll live, our darling Charlie, thanks to our Father in Heaven!" she faltered amidst her bursting sobs as she leant her head on her husband's breast.

"Ay, cry thy full heart out, dear old woman, but they are joyful tears, thanks be to God!" his brave voice faltered and his eyes were dim. "Come over here, Nell, you black-eyed hussy, and scold us for a couple of old fools."

I went half timidly, though Mary had glided out of the room and I was alone with them, and took my old place at their feet.

"You won't shut me out from your joy, mother."

“God forbid, my darling.” She put back my hair as my head rested in her lap, and her dark, troubled, eloquent eyes looked searchingly into mine. “Will you be my daughter, Helen?”

“Yes, mother. If Charles lives I will marry him.”


Very, very strange the words sounded in my ears, but I said them earnestly. She drew me closer to her, and holding me to her heart faltered out her thanks, and solemnly blessed me—“God reward you, child of my love.”

“Amen, amen! and now there’s to be no more crying,” said Uncle Edward, starting up joyously; “we’ve had water enough lately to swim a fleet, and the next man, woman, or child, that sheds a tear, why I wouldn’t be them, that’s all,” giving us both a sounding kiss. “And here comes Steenie and the doctors, and there’s Tremordyn’s voice in the hall, just come I suppose, so pluck up and look bright, both of you, and we’ll have a cheerful evening, please God.”

“If Charles lives, I will marry him.” I found myself repeating the words, as I went up-stairs to my room that night, earlier than the rest, as though to accustom myself to their strange sound. An irresistible longing to see him, took possession of me, as I reached the end of the curtained passage and involuntarily I turned down it, and seeing his door ajar, went in noiselessly and half fearfully.

The stillness was deep and unbroken for he was asleep, and Peggy, worn out with watching, nodded in the arm-chair by the fire, whose red glimmer filled the room. I stole to the bedside and bent over him, and listening a moment to his faint but tranquil breathing, sealed my promise with a kiss on his forehead. The touch of my lips did not break the deep sleep of exhaustion, and I crept silently out of the room, without disturbing poor, tired Peggy, and gained my own. It was done now. But the rain and wind sobbed against the windows, and my dreams that

night were heavy, and unspeakably sorrowful, and when I rose in the morning, the pillow was wet with my unconscious tears. Peace, oh! tormenting memories! sleep and vex me no more. I shut the gate of my past life behind me.





## CHAPTER III.

DR. TWYNFORD bade us good-bye the next day, as the bright and un hoped-for turn that matters had taken, rendered his attendance no longer needful, charging me at the last moment not to forget his advice, and hoping with dignified jocularity that we should meet when I came to London on my bridal tour. His parting from Dr. Stirling was quite affectionate, and the memory of the superb encomiums (enriched tenfold by the grandiloquent manner and serenely affable voice in which they were uttered) that he lavished on that worthy man, made him happy, I firmly believe, for the rest of his natural life.

So December came, white and clear, and the sharp winter sunlight glistened on the laurels and hollies, and gemmed the shining frost-work on pane and branch. And the old home happiness seemed to wake again in the scared and gloomy house, for poor Charles revived slowly from that long, dark nightmare, to smile faintly into his mother's face, and to whisper in the low, faltering, broken accents, that to her full heart were angel's music, that he was better. But he was perilously weak still, and perfect quiet was so necessary to his life, that I was not to see him for a long while, they said.

Perhaps I was grateful for this delay, for however I might struggle against the feeling, I shrank nervously from the thought of seeing him. Still I hope now, looking back at this time, that I did try, honestly, and seeking a higher strength than my own, to stifle all morbid regrets and weak longings, to bury the past, and live for the future. For light shall come to thee, oh, benighted wanderer—only believe, when thy feet stumble on the

dark mountains, and the black masses of trailing vapours shut out Heaven, that thy guiding star shines behind them, and ere long they shall divide, and its mild, loving glory fall on thy drooping head.

I strove conscientiously to be as busy as I could all day, and that was not very hard now, for Esther came down from London, to spend Christmas with us—the very proudest and loveliest of young mothers—bringing with her the wonderful baby, to the intense rapture of Maude, whose wonder and admiration of her god-daughter was a pretty sight, and also a prim, important London nurse, whom Esther herself, I believe, was rather afraid of, and whose airs inspired honest Peggy with unspeakable dismay and disgust.

It was on New Year's Day, after church, when I was alone, dreaming in the drawing-room, that Aunt Mary came in, and told me with a kiss that I might go and see Charles if I would.

I felt that a dreaded trial had come upon me, and I turned white.

“Is it so hard, poor child?” she said sorrowfully. “He has been longing to see you for a weary while, Nell.”

“No, no, it is not hard—forgive me, mother!” I faltered.

“And you will go, darling?”

“Yes.”

I ran upstairs quickly, lest my courage should fail, and then stopped and leant against the wall for lack of strength to go on, my head swimming giddily. Then I drove back my weakness by a desperate effort—a prayer for strength—and went in. I saw him lying on the sofa, wasted, and shadowy, and white as the crisp snow without, a red hectic spot on his cheek—called there, perhaps, by the excitement of seeing me—his brown, glossy rings of hair looking almost black from their contrast to the white, attenuated hand on which they rested.

My old passion of sorrow and self-reproach woke up again as I looked on him. I could have wept very much had not the fear of ex-

citing him in his weak state made me struggle sharply with myself, and sitting down beside him, take his hand in mine, though try as I might I could not speak first.

"You have been very lazy in coming to see me, Helen," he said, and his voice low and faint, sounded strange in my ears.

"They would not let me come before, Charles, they said it would only excite and tire you, and even now Dr. Stirling will pour forth volumes of indignation when he discovers this visit. But you are better now, are you not? I am so glad and grateful, and—and—"

Oh! trembling, coward heart, that would not prompt the words I wanted.

"Yes, I am better," he answered, in his low languid tones. "I have struggled back from the dark sea to the shores of Life, but I lie on the bank so shattered by the striving, that any wave may wash me back into the deep. I think I am dying of exhaustion."

He raised himself a little, but any exertion

was so painful to his shattered frame, that he rested his head on his hand with a faint moan of pain and weariness, while a dark, desponding shadow came over the mournful beauty of the white, worn young face. There needed no more to wake up the slumbering tenderness within me to quicken the slow words that would not come.

“No, Charles, live—live for me! I will not cast away now the love you offered me. I am so very, very sorry for all you have suffered. If—if my love, my companionship, will make you happier, lighten a little the sorrows of your life, take it. I will be your wife if you will, I will try—”

“Helen, Helen,” his frame quivered and a red glow lit up his white cheek. “Don’t mock me; you cannot mean this. I have had many such tormenting dreams in my hours of delirium, that had only a bitter awakening, and left me in darkness. Why will you bring them back again, when the sharpest struggle of my exhausted spirit is to forget them.”



“But this is no dream, no delusion, Charles. I am in earnest; how could I jest with you on such a subject, and now? I am ready to repair, at least to try to, the evil I have done. Will you not let me?” and I took his powerless hand in mine, my heart trembling half-gladly, half-sorrowfully, both feelings incomprehensible, and strangely mingled.

“Oh! Nell; true, generous noble woman,” he faltered: “you tempt me too strongly, and—but oh, God! I must be calm, this agitation kills me; that old horrible pain shoots through my head again.”

He hid his face in his hands; the struggle between his keen emotion and his utter weakness making his frail frame shiver like an autumn leaf.

“Give me some water,” he gasped faintly.

I thought I had killed him, but the fit passed off at length, and he lay with his eyes shut, white and exhausted; and I watched him in silence, frightened and remorseful, not daring to speak again.

After a pause, in which he seemed trying to gather strength, he said in a low broken tone, "Speak to me, Helen?"

"Only wait a little, Charles, you are so weak now."

"Ay, but I may never be stronger," was the mournful answer, that sunk sorrowfully upon my heart; "it was not a dream, what you said just now?" raising his eyes with a look of entreaty.

"No, Charlie, it was no dream."

"And you will love me if I live? Put your hand on my forehead to still its throbbing, and look with your true eyes into mine. There is no falsehood in their clear depths, Nelly. God bless you! God reward you!"

The deep, trembling earnestness in his faint voice, the grateful, half-incredulous delight in his eyes touched me very much.

"And you will be the star of my life, darling; the light of my eyes? Have you thought of everything? is this no quick impulse of your sweet generous soul? Have you thought," his

voice sinking still lower, "of my constant ill health, my lameness, the certainty of my never recovering, the ——"

"I have thought of it all, Charlie. Have you thought of—of the stain on my birth, that I am the daughter of shame? that, as your wife, I shall bring you nothing ——"

"Except the priceless wealth of your love and beauty, and your good, noble, true heart. What more do I seek, Nell?" He drew me close to him, held me in a long passionate embrace. "You have made life strangely precious to me, dear, noble girl. I shall long pray, struggle to live now, and the gratitude of my whole life, if God spares it, shall be yours, a poor recompense, dearest, but all that I can give you." His earnest words, the flush of grateful gladness on his pale, wasted features, moved me inexpressibly.

I felt unworthy, and buried my face in my hands to hide my rising tears. "You must not talk any more" I said, after a moment's silent struggle with my folly. "I have excited you

too much already, you are quite flushed. Remember you must be careful now for my sake."

"My darling!"

"This is such delicious, mild, spring-like weather, Charlie, that the snowdrops are bursting already. When you can walk we will have some of our old strolls in the copse and garden, and some of our old drives if it is mild enough."

"I will try to grow better for your sweet sake, my queen, my white lily!"

"And strength will come, Charlie, never fear. Spring is coming, or will be, ere long, with sunshine, and hope on new wings."

"And the sunshine that has fallen on my path is bright indeed, so bright that I scarcely dare yet to believe it. Helen, my words are poor and powerless, but I thank you with my soul, with every pulse of my being."

The words were faint and inarticulate, and a long sigh of exhaustion followed them.

"Charles, I forbid you to speak another syl-

lable. You look dreadfully tired, do try to sleep to please me. Shall I draw the blind down?"

"No, I want nothing but your presence—that is the very essence of comfort. Will you stay with me?"

I answered yes, and he sunk gradually into the sleep of exhaustion, holding my hand fast clasped in his, and I sat by him, leaning my head against the sofa, thinking over what lay before me. I had done right, I knew, and why was it so hard to brighten with my affection his dreary path, who loved me so strongly, so far beyond my deserts—to be the support and gladdener of his fragile suffering youth? It should not be—my destiny was a fairer one than I deserved. Courage, desponding soul, for the clouds are breaking, though the beloved star has gone down into the cold dim sea, it is a fair morning that breaks over the ruin of thy dead hopes! Vex me no more, haunting echoes of the past, winter wind sighing mournfully through the broken

walls of my fallen palace! I will not listen to you; I will shut my ears and walk on.

I dreamt thus till Maude's little hand on my shoulder roused me, for I had not heard her entrance.

"He is asleep, isn't he?" she whispered; "how beautiful he looks. It won't be very hard to love him, Nell," she added, half appealingly.

"No, darling."

"Steenie wants you to ride with him this bright afternoon. Esther isn't inclined to go, and I will stay with Charlie. A canter will do you good, Nell dear; can you steal away that little hand of yours without waking him."

It was not very hard to withdraw it from his relaxing hold.

"Cleverly done; now away with you, Nelly."

"Be careful not to wake him, like a good little woman; he was so worn out."

She looked half pleased, half vexed, and shook her curls at me.

"Never fear, sweet Madam Cautious. Why,



I have been his nurse ever since I was ten years old, and don't think I ever awoke him once; but I suppose you'll be looking on him as your exclusive property now, and all my claims will be forgotten."

"Exactly, Maude, so be careful," I said, laughing at her pretty jealousy, and running down stairs where, in the drawing-room, instead of Steenie alone, I found to my great dismay Uncle Edward, discussing with him the merits of two fowling pieces, and Esther, with her baby in her lap, absorbed in the motherly diversion of tickling its soft cheek with her long black ringlets, and rubbing its chin to make it coo bewitchingly.

I hardly knew why everybody paused and looked up inquiringly as I came in, thereby puzzling and confusing me terribly.

"Have you done it, Nell?" was Steenie's salutation.

"Done what," enquired Esther. "Such a

wee precious little darling it was!"—this to the baby. "What have you done, Nelly?"

"She has—I see it in her face. Hurrah!" shouted Steenie, waving the gun he held over his head, and executing a triumphant caper.

"The boy's daft," was Uncle Edward's bewildered opinion: "he'll knock somebody's brains out with that gun-barrel he's flourishing about, and here's Nell all blushes, as red as a cabbage rose, which is next door to a miracle," and he examined me closely. "What is that it, barnie? Kiss me, my sweet lass; and so it's all settled, eh? and my blessing on thee, Nell," following up these disjointed sentences by a fatherly hug.

"What's all settled?" demanded Esther, fidgetting about the baby in a fever of impatient curiosity. "Papa, do be merciful; Steenie; leave off those absurd grins, and relieve me; Nelly," appealing to me in despair, "what are are all these mysteries? will nobody tell me?"

"My dear Nest," said Steenie, gravely, "for a discreet matron, and the mistress of a family,

you are really insatiably curious. However, as you must know ultimately, I suppose, in spite of Nell's blushes and beseeching looks, I may as well inform you—that Charles is going to be married."

This astounding announcement seemed to enlighten Esther most satisfactorily, for without waiting to hear another word, she deposited the baby on the rug, to its intense discomfiture, and flew across to me, exclaiming how glad, how very glad she was, and then fell to kissing me, half crying and half laughing, in a very ridiculous, but very endearing manner.

And Uncle Edward commencing a merciless fire of jokes about having the banns published next Sunday, I was heartily glad to escape up stairs and dress for my ride, while Steenie went to order the horses; and a pleasant canter with him through the bright mild sunshine of the soft winter day swept all the cobwebs out of my brain. The only vexation was that Steenie, do what I would, could not be induced to talk of Jessie, and

though on every other subject he rattled away as blithely as ever, that one he resolutely shirked, in spite of all my manœuvres.

And I was forced sadly to conclude that for poor little Jessie, there was no remedy but patience and weary waiting, and to hope a time would come when Steenie should awake to know the value of the treasure lying at his feet.

When we returned home, we found Dr. Stirling in the drawing-room, come accordingly to custom, to dine with us on New Years Day. Mary and her husband, and Mrs. Macdonald and Jessie were usually our other guests, but to night Jessie did not come, she had a bad head-ache, her mother said, and I did not wonder at it, and would have felt more angry with Steenie than ever, had I not seen him look sad and remorseful. The doctor was deep in a newspaper when I came, and greeted me by pulling his spectacles as high up on his forehead as they would go, and demanding, with a growl, if I had been risking my neck again.

“Even so, doctor, but you see I am become such an expert horse-woman that I am troubled with no such ignoble fears.”

“Well, run away and pull off that absurd masculine costume, that looks like a female hussar’s, and come down and look like a decent Christian woman, for it wants a quarter to five now, and if you keep me waiting for my dinner why ——”

And in despair of devising an adequate punishment, Dr. Stirliug blew his nose fiercely, and scowled first at the clock and then at me.

“Is it so late? I must make haste. Have you seen Charles yet?”

“Ah! that puts me in mind of something. Just stop a minute, young woman, and attend to me.”

And he rose from his chair and standing on the rug before me, took off his spectacles, wiped and put them on again, contemplating me all the while with majestic severity.

“Just explain this to me, will you? When I visited the patient up stairs yesterday evening, I found him lying on the sofa, with not sixpenny-worth of strength in him, and as white as my pestle and mortar at home; and behold! when I went up half-an-hour ago to look at him, there was the young rascal sitting up, Lord bless you, in an arm chair, and talking as saucily as you please, to that curly-headed missy of a Maude, and when I asked him what he meant by it, he laughed, absolutely and literally laughed at me, with the most consummate impudence. You might have knocked me down with a feather.”

And his alarm and discomposure were so very genuine indeed that I was forced to follow Charles's example, and laugh with all my heart.

“Were you not glad, doctor?” I asked, when I had recovered my gravity.

“Glad! I was astounded, bewildered, stupified, frightened almost. What have you been doing to him, you hussy?”

“Not much, doctor, only spoken a few words.”



He stared incredulously at me, so hard that his eyes at last began to twinkle, and the smile hovering about his mouth struggled into a broad grin.

“So that’s it,” he said after a pause, without taking his eyes from my face; “well, I’m glad you’ve seen the error of your ways. And so you’re going to mend them? well, well, you’re a good lass, and—and confound it if you musn’t give me a kiss after this.”

And without further ceremony he took my face between his rough brown hands as he would a child’s, and bestowing on me a sounding kiss, let me go with the assurance that I was a better little soul than he took me for, and he hoped I might be happy with all his heart.

## CHAPTER IV.

IN about a week my engagement to Charles, by some supernatural means, had become known to all the neighbourhood, and I had to endure the usual amount of congratulatory visits, and country-town tattle, besides some incredulous amazement, rather more vexatious. But I had made up my mind to it all, and laughed it off courageously enough. Lady Crawford drove over in high state to call on purpose, I believe, to find out the whole story; and Grace told me in confidence that I was extremely silly to spoil such a charming romance, as Charlie dying for love of me, would have been. Kate Leeson

applauded me vehemently, protesting at the same time she could not have so sacrificed herself for the world; and Mrs. Selwyn, one day when I called on her, hoped, with a sympathetic face that it was not true, and being assured that it was, grew indignant, opined that it was a shame, and that Mrs. Brotherton ought to know better than to allow such a thing.

I laughed at first, then grew vexed, and finally decided, after escaping from my sympathising friend, and while driving home, that I was very much vexed indeed. Why would these officious people meddle with what did not concern them? I was the best judge of my own happiness, and then I felt angry with myself that such idle, officious gossip should sting me so keenly.

A letter from Lucy Esham, found at the post-office, quieted me a little. It was dated from Germany, where she was travelling with her sister, Lady Cramworth, for the benefit of that most insupportable of be-wigged noblemen, her brother-in-law. She made no allusion to the

great woe that had fallen upon me since I saw her—perhaps she was wise. Poor Mrs. Clayton, she said, was still in Devonshire; people said her husband had got into money difficulties, that the nephew who had the management of the bank—I remembered the poor soul's aristocratic horror of his rings and lavender-water—had turned out a rogue. Poor old woman, crushed in hope, heart, and fortune, night was closing darkly over her! I had only heard once from her—the letter was a few trembling lines, written incoherently in an agony of grief—since Frank died. Life abroad, Lucy said, was a second-rate imitation of life at home, there was nothing new under the sun. She longed for a simple talk with me, to hear some refreshing nonsense from her *fleur des champs*, her white briar-rose. When should we meet?

And I mused over the letter and the writer till I reached home to see Charles come down stairs for the first time and lying on the sofa in the drawing-room, sadly worn and fragile, but with

such a bright look of happiness in his pale, worn face, such a gleam of delighted welcome lighting up the languor of his blue eyes, as he rose to meet me, that my grateful gladness swept away all shadowy misgivings—all remembrance of the Haverford tattle.

I wrote next day to poor Mrs. Clayton—the bright, kind, cheery Aunt Emily of old days, how sorely changed—and Heaven only knows the strange agony it was to write that letter, telling her I had broken my faith to the dead, and what a throng of ghastly shadows it stirred up! A hard and sorrowful task—and she never answered it, and I was left to think bitterly enough that she could not forgive nor think kindly of me; and I fear it was so, for we never met again.

My marriage was spoken of in the spring, but it was still a distant idea, for Charles' strength—little as it was at the best of times—returned very slowly and doubtfully, and he still suffered much from head-ache and exhaustion, and needed watchful care. But he was content as long as I

sat by his sofa, his hand resting in mine, and while I read, or talked, or sang to him; and so glided on the quiet time, like the hush of a softly stealing tide.

Our Christmas party had dispersed. Steenie, who had become unaccountably restless after Jessie's departure (Jessie, poor little soul, had been sent to some friends in Lancashire, "to get cured o' her fykes and fancies," her mother said) had gone off on a visit to an old school-fellow in Scotland, and Mr. Warrington had come and carried off his wife and heiress, graciously promising to return for the wedding, so only Maude was left to us.

And spring burst upon the world, with bursting leaves, and delicious air, and ripening sunshine: and Charles revived wonderfully, and Aunt Mary looked so sweetly and earnestly happy to see his better health and spirits—the old sorrowful look had left her calm forehead now—and everybody was so touchingly and tenderly kind to me, that mine must have been an un-



grateful heart had it found room for ought but grateful content; and so the ghostly shadows faded into the dim twilight and seldom vexed me now. Thus I thought one bright April morning, as I stood glancing over Charles's shoulder, who was sketching a girl gathering violets, watching half envyingly, the light, skilful touches of his thin, white fingers.

"Don't put my face on her, Charlie," I said, laughing.

"Why not?"

"Because I am really weary of my own physiognomy, which looks out so perseveringly from every one of your fancy sketches."

"Suppose it will come in spite of me—starts out from the touches of my pencil without any will of my own?"

"Pshaw, Charlie! I know I am not handsome, that is stupid flattery."

"Handsome or not, there is something 'wonderful taking' as Peggy says about you, Nell. What magic gift is it? even as a child, it was

yours. What a little pale, shrinking lily you were then. I have a very distinct recollection of one summer evening, when I had a terrible head-ache, of your coming timidly and shrinkingly into the room with a bunch of wild roses in your little hand for me, and at your standing beside the sofa, and looking at me with such divine compassion in your dark, earnest, child's eyes. What potent eyes they were, Nell, even in those days."

"Nonsense, finish your violet girl, and come out for a turn on the terrace this bright morning."

"I want to settle one point first: when are we to be married?"

The question brought me, in spite of myself, a strange, painful thrill, and the old dim shadow seemed to fall across the sunlight.

"Shall it be next month? You don't answer me."

"Yes, if you will, Charlie."

He pushed aside his drawing, and rising, drew me close to him.

“And you will be my wife then, darling? It must be a dream, Nell,” kissing my forehead with a grateful tenderness, whilst a tremor passed over his slight frame.

“No, Charles; it is a waking reality.”

“My life!” he said, with passionate warmth, a flash of intense emotion glancing over his pale features; “I wish I had a strong arm for you to lean on, Helen — to uphold and defend you.”

“We will reverse the usual order of matters, Charlie; you shall lean on me. It is pleasant to feel I am necessary to some one—”

“Bless you for your loving flattery, and for the sweet strong spirit that shines through your true, dark eyes. Ours must be a very quiet wedding, Nell.”

“Yes: only our own family, and a few of our old friends.”

“Why need we have any friends at all?” said he, colouring nervously.

“Nay, we must not affront people who have

been kind to us; besides, are you ashamed of your bride?"

"Not of the bride, who will be the very queen of lilies, but of the bridegroom, who is—; never mind what he is, Nell. Blind your sweet eyes with love's magic whenever you look on him."

"Why? Because he is pale and worn, and walks a little lame! Dear Charles, your misfortunes will only make me love you the more."

The kind words were spoken, and I did not repent them—the delighted flush, and the smile of deep affection, that gave to his face a startling beauty, repaid me.

"Then you don't think so much of my unfortunate lameness?" he said in a low tone.

"It is so slight a thing, Charlie, that if it were not painful to you, I should seldom think of it at all."

"Helen, even your true, tender, woman's heart cannot guess the throb of exquisite delight your words give me."

I almost feared at the trembling earnestness with which this was spoken.

“We are going to wander a little, Nell; we will not always remain at anchor. We must take a tour, save the mark! as respectable married couples usually do. I am getting restless and ambitious, and want to see something of the world. Dear old Holmsley is a very loveable corner of the earth, but I want a peep beyond its green lanes and shadowy woods, beloved as they are.”

“Yes; we will go to the Isle of Wight, somewhere by the sea-side, and wander and dream by the breezy waves, and listen to their eternal music, the anthem of winds and waters.

“Yes, Nell, and bless God for our happiness.”

His eyes shone with dreamy anticipations of a bright future, and hopes which I prayed no fault of mine might ever quench.

“And if troubles come, as they must to all children of earth, our love will be our shield against them, and if the clouds are thick, I

shall still see your dear hand, 'my lily, pointing heavenwards. But here comes my father, with a letter in his hand, as if he had news for us."

If any human countenance ever indicated in the blankest form the most hopeless and intense perplexity, that face was Uncle's Edward's, as he walked slowly in, with an open letter in his hand, and without noticing either of us took his seat in his arm-chair, and then, placing the letter on his knee, gave his head a preliminary rub all over with both his hands, as if to freshen his wits, and then taking the epistle up again proceeded to con it once more.

And then as Charles and I looked on with bewildered eyes, he dropped the letter—after having read it once more—with a groan, and stared at us with a face of blank dismay.

"Is anything the matter, sir?" Charles asked.

I felt frightened—I scarcely knew why.

"Matter—ay, matter enough, lad," said Uncle Edward, looking gloomily at me.

A chill, mysterious foreboding smote me, like



a blast of cold wind. I cried out shudderingly, "my mother."

"You are right, lassie," said my uncle, with another and a deeper groan; "the vagabond has ruined her."

My head reeled and swam, and a mist came before my eyes. After a confused blank of how long I know not, I awoke to find myself lying in Charles arms, he tenderly bathing my temples with water, and his eyes of terror and love looking down into mine.

"She's better now, Charlie," said Uncle Edward's voice. "Don't be frightened, lad. It's been a shock to her, poor lamb—there, cheer up, Nell, my sweet lass," and he patted my cheek lovingly with his great hand.

Recollection came back, and I longed to hear more—to know everything. I sat up white and trembling. "Tell me all, uncle."

"Not now, my darling, not now. We'll wait a little."

"Oh! no; at once, at once."

I clasped my hands together in the agony of my supplications. Poor, tender-hearted, noble uncle! In his generous compassion for me, the sincerity of his honest distress, he knew not how to begin, till at last, wrung forth by my agonised anxiety, the story fell slowly and reluctantly from his lips.

The letter was from an old acquaintance of his in former days, the banker at Chedbury, my mother's post-town—it told a short story.

Major and Mrs. Raymond were ruined hopelessly. Their affairs had been long in a desperate state, and were now beyond remedy. He had become involved in some gambling transaction, and was suspected of forging bills for a considerable amount upon a London bank.

“And the rascal has fled the country,” burst out Uncle Edward, quivering with his honest passion of indignation, “and left poor Emma to face the ruin he has brought upon her alone. God help her, poor soul! brought down to the dust by the villain for whom she lost name and fame.”

“ Oh! mother, mother!”

I could not stop that passionate crying as I lay on Charles’s shoulder, and sobbed out my sick heart there, hearing vaguely the low trembling tones that strove to comfort me.

“ Oh! what a wife for you, Charlie—a forger’s daughter—a child of guilt and shame.”

“ Nell, my life, why do you torture me with such cruel words. You are mine, dearest, and I am yours. Is my love no comfort for you?”

It was then, Heaven knows, as I lay in his arms and listened to the passionate words of deep, generous affection, the memory of which even now, grey-haired woman as I am, brings a throb of gratitude to my old heart.

“ Thou art right to make much of her, lad-die,” said Uncle Edward and his voice quivered, “ and may God bless you both. She’s had little love from her own flesh and blood, poor lamb. But oh! that unhappy Emma! that poor lost thing. What a proud, bright, lovely creature she was in the old days long ago, when she and

my Mary were two handsome lasses together, before shame had touched her, before she knew the villain; but, Lord forgive me, he is this poor child's father."

He held out his arms to me, and I ran into them, and hid my head there.

"Oh! uncle, am I fit to be your daughter."

"Helen, Helen!" Charles broke out passionately.

"Hold thy peace, Charlie lad; she's but a silly little wench. The sins of thy parents bring no guilt on thy head, Nell, innocent lassie, weeping for thy father's shame." He held me close to his breast, and let me cry there.

"Can nothing be done to help her—my unhappy mother!" I could see her—a tall, haggard woman, a cloud of dark disordered hair, pushed recklessly back from her faded cheek and worn brow, the old haughty spirit shining through her dark defiant eyes, brooding over the grey ashes of a spent fire, dead, like her own hopes, but shrinking with an almost fierce contempt

from every touch of pity or kindness, and ever thinking hopelessly.

“Oh! uncle, think of her alone, without a friend, left to struggle with shame and ruin, without one kind voice.”—My tears blotted out the desolate picture.

“Hush, hush! Nell, poor little woman; we’ll do our best; I will go down to the old place to-morrow if you will, and see if I can help her, though it’s likely she’ll meet me with her old haughty face, and tell me to go back where I came from. But that musn’t hinder us from trying to aid the poor thing in her sore trouble, cruel as she has been to thee, Nell. But oh! why did that unlucky lad, Clement, ever go to India, sorely against my wishes was it,” said Uncle Edward, with a mournful shake of the head; “but he would go, he wanted to see something of the world, and I don’t think he was very happy at home after poor Marsden was gone, and then comes that black whiskered ruffian,” squeezing me very tight in his hot indignation, “and de-

ludes poor unhappy Emma into marrying him, with his soft words and silky smiles, as if she hadn't known enough of them before. And she marries him who first wrought her ruin in her innocent girlhood, and what but shame and desolation can be the result of an evil deed? Oh! Nell, Nell, woe, black and heavy, has come upon the old house. The villian wouldn't have dared to have shown his face there had Clement stayed at home to look after his own, and now the poor boy will come back to find a ruined mother, and a dishonoured name. It's a mercy the rascal couldn't touch the property—I'm a trustee for that, I'm thankful to say—or he'd have cut down the very timber to gamble with."

A shiver of sick horror and humiliation fell upon me, for the man of whom he spoke was my father.

Dear Uncle Edward! he saw this, and begged my pardon tenderly. And then he spoke with such generous pity for my unhappy mother, and such anxiety to serve her, that I could only



cling to him, and sob out the thanks of my full heart; and then he left me to Charles, with a fatherly hug, and a charge to keep up my spirits while he went to seek out Aunt Mary, and talk with her over what was best to be done. It was soon settled—on this point they both thought alike.

The very next day Uncle Edward, faithful to his promise, took his journey to my old home, slept at the inn at Chedbury, and rode over the next morning to the old fallen manor. My mother received him with the haughty, impassive face of old times, freezing by her icy manner, his honest hearty friendliness.

She thanked him, was grieved at the trouble he had taken, but she required no assistance, would accept no friendly aid, she needed none—I thought I heard my dear uncle urging it with kind, half-timid awkwardness, and my mother shrinking back with her cold disdainful face. She was accustomed to act for herself.

There was no sign of woman's weakness or

distress the whole time, Uncle Edward said, not a tear or a flutter of emotion. The cheek a little worn, the brow a little furrowed, were the only signs of the long soul struggle, the slow, consuming fire, which, if she were not marble inwardly as outwardly, must have been wearing her away for long years.

She did not mention her husband, except to say he was in France. She was so cold, so proud, so unbending, that full as my uncle's heart was of honest pity and kindness for the forsaken, ruined woman, he knew not how to express it; her haughty eyes upon his face disdained all touch of sympathy, her scornful hand swept away all offers of assistance. She had written, she said, to Clement, in India, desiring him to give up his appointment there and to come home, and take possession of the house and property.

He was married now and must have seen enough of the world, and be ready to return to England, and live in his own home. Here Uncle

Edward gave way to an outburst of blunt regret that Clement had ever gone to India, but that, my mother said, with her immoveable eyes on him, was his own will, and that it was useless to refer to the past. She should remain in the old house, till her son and his wife should arrive, then she had no wish to be a burden on them, but had not yet determined what course she should then take, except that she should go and live elsewhere.

Uncle Edward listened to all this in a sort of stupefaction, feeling that he had a hundred things to say, a hundred thoughts to express, and not knowing how to give utterance to one of them, longing all the while, as he told me, for Aunt Mary to be his mouth-piece and help him out of his dire perplexity.

"I felt dumb-founded, lassie," he afterwards said, "I could not go on blazing away at her husband before her, with her proud eyes on my face; it wouldn't have been a manly action, and when she came to a dead stop, and sat like a queen,

looking on the meanest of her slaves, I hadn't a word. So after desperately begging her once more—and stupidly enough, I dare swear—to let me be of some use to her, and getting another decided snub, I backed out, she giving me a bend like an empress, and getting on my horse, galloped off, feeling myself an awkward, dunder-headed old fool, and drawing a long breath when I was fairly outside the gates. Ah, Nell, the old place, fair and pleasant as it used to be, is sorely changed. The lawn is like a neglected field, and the trim pleasure grounds are like the sluggard's garden. The old house frowns dismally upon you, with half the windows shut up, and no smoke rising from the chimneys. It may be weather tight still, as I said before—but it's all ruin within and without."

Uncle Edward went on to tell me how he rode back to Chedbury, revolving in his mind desperate schemes of aiding my mother, and hitting upon no satisfactory ones. But he did not tell me what I knew long afterwards, that in

the kindness of his good, honest heart, he sent her, on his return home, a cheque for a hundred pounds, with a few simple friendly lines, begging her not to refuse him the pleasure of affording her some slight aid in her trouble, and that the cheque was sent back by return of post with a brief haughty note, positively declining to receive any favours from him. This, like most of Uncle Edward's good deeds, was done in secret, till accident, or rather Providence, lifted the veil. He heard much at Chedbury, concerning both my parents, from the people at the inn, the tradesmen of the town; the little place was run-over with agitated gossip about the crash at the old Manor House.

They all spoke respectfully and pityingly, though with a sort of awe, of the cold, proud handsome lady. They were better days when poor Mr. Marsden lived, whom they all loved and regretted; it was an evil hour for her, they said, when the young squire went to India, and she married again.

The debts in the town were very inconsiderable, but they believed heavy sums were owing to London creditors—all for Major Raymond; his losses at play were tremendous.

With these tidings, gathered from the gossip of the little town, for he had no means of obtaining them from a more authentic source, Uncle Edward came home. And bringing no word of kindness or sympathy, no tender enquiry for me from my mother's frozen lips! The determination with which she rejected all his earnest, friendly offers of aid, seemed to widen the gulf that lay between us. My weak arms could not bridge it over alone, and no awakening love or repentance in her soul started forward to meet and clasp them.

She shook them off resolutely, treating them as officious meddlers in affairs with which they had no concern. There was nothing more that could be done, and I was left to weep and ponder over the inscrutable mystery of my life. I thought often, with a strange terror, if she were to die



without forgiving and blessing me, would her restless ghost haunt my dreams? How should we meet in the next world, would she look on me at the bar of judgment with those same stern, wrathful eyes, the same unflinching relentless face! How would our souls meet together when free from the burden of mortality—the mother and child, who through life never loved each other, and in death were strangers? And these dim visions were so utterly perplexing and oppressive that I was fain to seek Charles and let his voice and smile scatter them.

## CHAPTER V.

IN the calm, bright, May weather, all the family re-assembled in the old beloved home, where dwelt all the sunshine of my life, and Charles and I were married.

It was a quiet wedding. Maude and Jessie Macdonald were my bridesmaids, and very lovely ones they were, Jessie looking brighter since her return from Lancashire, owing perhaps to Steenie's magic presence, for when the light of his handsome eyes were on her, the little fluttering heart wanted no other sunshine. But I did not think of Jessie then, as I knelt before the altar of the grey old church, linked with my childish

remembrances, and, white and quivering, poured out my marriage vows, and felt the trembling pressure of my husband's hand. And if Charles looked pale and worn and nervous on his wedding day, it was no marvel, for his bride was little better; and I needed only a look at the light of quiet, still, earnest happiness in his eyes to tell me how he loved me.

Mr. Tremordyn married us, and after the breakfast, and the bustle of leave-taking, and after Uncle Edward's hearty blessing, and Aunt Mary's close quiet embrace and whispered prayers, and Maude's tearful kisses, and all kind farewells from the rest were over, and the carriage was waiting, and Peggy, who was to go with us, triumphant in the back seat, smiling over a basket of eatables designed for our refreshment should we be attacked with faintness on the road; then Mr. Tremordyn came close to me ere I took Charles's arm, and shaking me heartily by the hand, wished me in a low tone, not happiness as

the others had done, but strength. Perhaps this was his highest idea of happiness.

And as the carriage rolled out from the old familiar gates, past a crowd of the village people, waiting with their well-known faces of honest congratulation, to give us a hearty cheer; and as with my hand in my husband's, I heard his whispered words, "now you are all my own, darling," I don't know whether the rush of tears that relieved my full heart were more of joy or of sorrow.

But I was married now, and the gate of dreams was shut behind me, and before me lay the fresh untrodden path of my new life. And I was happy, with a calm quiet feeling of rest, unknown for a long time, happy through that journey, every little incident of which I still so freshly remember; happy through the next three months which we spent in the Isle of Wight, by the sea-side, according to our old agreement.

The sea breezes seemed to bring life and

strength to his frail frame, and neither of us was ever weary of wandering and dreaming by those restless waves, or sitting on the beach and listening to the everlasting chime of the blue waters.

I loved them both on a bright, breezy day, when they broke on the sand in crisp little wavelets, with a sprinkle of white foam and a rejoicing music, and the soft shadows of the snowy clouds flitted over them, on calm, still, summer evenings, when the sun went down into them in fire, and cool airs began to dance and flutter over their heaving surface; and I loved them on grey mornings, when they seemed one vast fathomless expanse, stretching out into eternity, when the solemn hush that rested on them seemed like a silent lamentation and they heaved and broke slowly on the beach, with a surging moan.

I never grew weary of listening to that music of winds and waters, and I was sorry when the time came that we must hear them no more. We spent another month wandering about that lovely island, resting, wherever our fancy prompted, in

green wooded nooks, or in breezy places where we might still hear the sea music, and Charles seemed so well and happy, luxuriating in the bright scenery and the delicious summer weather, that these first months of my new life melted away, like a long, quiet, summer dream.

Peggy was in a sunny frame of mind, only occasionally, ruffled by slight disagreements with independent landladies, whenever her sturdy championship on our behalf, infringed upon their lawful privileges. Peggy was to live with us, for the bare notion of her leaving Master Charlie, married or unmarried was too ridiculous to be entertained for an instant by the faithful old soul, so she was to be my maid, our cook when we wanted one, our housekeeper, our general guardian and defender of our rights, to look after us altogether and see we wern't cheated, to take motherly care of us in all points as two helpless, silly, young creatures, just embarking without chart or compass in the great ocean of life.



It was August before we returned to Holmsley, to find the beloved old place glowing with the ripe luxuriance of the full summer, and to confess, as we drove through the deep shade of the green lanes, and saw the grey old-fashioned house rising from among its orchard and broad garden, and its back ground of wooded hills that home was the best place after all. And our glad, warm welcome went far to confirm this opinion, for so overwhelmingly petted were we, that I began to have some apprehensions that I should grow conceited beyond all bearing, and end by thinking myself the quintessence of human perfection.

Aunt Mary's delighted happiness at getting Charles back again, her grateful delight at seeing him so much better, the eager eyes with which she watched him, when he walked, the pleasure she had in sitting beside him dwelling on his face, indulging in her old fond trick of pushing back his hair from his forehead with her white, slender hand, was a touching sight to see. And Dr.

Stirling was brought to confess that the difference in Charles since our marriage was really worth notice; that I was a good child, and furthermore, that all women were not as bad as Carry Ramsbottom, which was a great victory. Then all our friends in the neighbourhood thought it incumbent on them to give parties in honor of the bride and bridegroom—which kindness I could well have dispensed with—where Charles and I were expected to appear, and be criticised, and admired, and talked about; and now and then, though not very often, by some judicious coaxing and skilful eloquence, I persuaded him to go to one of these festivities, because an uncomfortable feeling of self-reproach was always heavy upon me when I went without him, and, perhaps, because I began to love him very dearly, and wanted foolishly everybody to see how refinedly and spiritually handsome he looked when flushed by the excitement of a party—if I might thus silence the idle gossip, some fragment of which floated now and then to my ear, and

wounded me keenly, that I married him from compassion.

So the bright summer time sped away merrily, and when October came with yellowing leaves and grey skies, the time for our projected London visit, we agreed that we had been living quite a dissipated life lately.

Charles was more anxious to go to town than I was; change amused and did him good, and I was too well content to see him free from pain and in cheerful spirits to thwart his fancy. Sorrow slept; I would not wake it. He was happy, poor fellow, and what marvel that I loved him, and that though my head lay on another breast than Frank's, no reproachful ghost rose before me from the shadows of the silent land.

We had seen nothing of Steenie all this summer; after a long stay in the Highlands he had gone to Paris with his old schoolfellow, and the brief cheering influence of poor Jessie's Lancashire visit had faded away, and she was grievously

changed, grown so pale, and thin, and nervous, the poor child, that it was a pity to see her.

It was not very hard to tell what ailed her, though Mrs. Macdonald, dear, simple lady, vexed her motherly soul to discover the cause that her bairn was so wearily changed, and mourned over the fykes and fancies for which there was no cure. And therefore I rejoiced greatly when a sisterly invitation came from Esther for Jessie to spend some time with her, and for Maude to come too as a companion for her; and when it was settled that they were both to go up to town with Charles and me. Everybody predicted that the change would do wonders for Jessie; Mrs. Macdonald bustling off in a fever of excitement to furnish up her lassie's wardrobe for her London visit; and Jessie herself smiled and thanked us, and a flush started to her little pale face, called forth, perhaps, by a tremulous thought that Steenie might pass through London on his way from Paris.

Poor Jessie! She never whispered even to me

—whom she was so fond of—the heart-sickness, the consuming care; you read it in the faded cheek, and drooping figure, and eyes weary with waiting for what never came. And Steenie was in Paris trying to forget, flying from the phantom that, ride where you will, sits behind and grins over your shoulder.

Lucy Esham had ere this written to me from Park Lane, announcing her arrival at last in London. Lord Cramworth's crazy constitution was not so easily patched up as had been supposed, and his health had obliged them to remain in Germany the whole of the summer, thereby missing the glories of the London season, to the great wrath of his wife and sister-in-law. She was exultant at the prospect of our coming to London, declaring that the thought of seeing me and her old interesting friend, Charlie, gave her quite a new sensation. She wanted to see how matrimony became us, and hoped we had not degenerated into a quiet, prosy, every-day couple, which was usually the effect of getting

married. Through all this careless nonsense there shone ever a glimpse of real friendliness.

Her second letter told me she had taken charming lodgings for us at Kensington, near the Park, and having had a personal conflict with the landlady, had got them an astonishing bargain. So far all was well, provided Lucy's notions of a bargain agreed at all with mine, which I could not help doubting, but Charles laughed so unmercifully at my economical fears, declaring that people were allowed to be extravagant for the first twelvemonth, that I was forced to give them to the winds for the present.

So we started on a dull, grey October morning, Maude of course in dancing spirits, and even pale, quiet Jessie looking brighter than usual, and were set down in London at night time, very tired and bewildered, and somewhat puzzled to know amidst all the surging bustle and excitement, what new world we had fallen into.

We were a little clearer the next morning, after a night's rest, and able to discover that our



lodgings were pretty, cheerful rooms, looking on the Park, on the great trees, rich with October tints and their tops fired by the autumn sunshine.

We were alone by the afternoon, for Esther had come to see us, and carried off Maude and Jessie to Russell Square, and Charles was lying on the sofa, very tired, but in good spirits, and I standing by the window gazing out with almost a child's pleasure at the new bustling aspect of things outside, when a very grand carriage, with a big coat of arms, two fat gray horses, and a rosy coachman, rolled up to the door, and Lucy Esham's familiar face looked out.

"Here she is, Charlie!"

"Who?" said he, starting up.

"Why Lucy, to be sure, but don't move, dearest. Welcome, welcome!" said I, running to the door to meet her. I almost wondered at the great pleasure it gave me to see her worn, handsome face, and dark, proud, indifferent eyes.

"Now, Mrs. Charles Brotherton for a good,

school-girl hug." She gave me a hearty embrace, then held me off a little to look at me, and then kissed me again, and wrung both my hands in hers and laughed at her own simplicity. "Never say I am a cold-hearted young lady of fashion again, since we have met as the tenderest of bosom friends, Nell. Won't you introduce your husband to me?—but I think we are old acquaintances, or used to be, and may be again if you will let us. Welcome, Mr. Brotherton," giving him a hearty shake of the hand; "you look slightly better, and infinitely happier, if I may say it, than when we said good-bye some months ago."

He laughed, and returned her friendly greeting with all heartiness.

"You look the picture of domestic comfort here already," said Lucy, laughing and glancing round the room, as she took her seat near the fire, and fell into her usual attitude of graceful negligence—that quiet, easy, self-possession that I always wondered at and half envied. "What say you to your new abode, Helen, and to the

results of my bargaining? I assure you I maintained a very sharp conflict with that silvery-voiced landlady below, on your behalf, and kept Victoria waiting half-an-hour at the gate, to the imminent peril of the fat coachman taking cold, while the struggle was deciding."

"Indeed we are both delighted with the rooms and the rent, and are very grateful to you."

"Not a whit; I wanted something to employ my mind, and even lodging-hunting was a change from those dreary objectless drives with Victoria, round and round the Park, and those unprofitable canters in Rotten Row, meeting the same faces every day. So now, Nell, I have sent away the carriage, and mean to weary you with my company for an hour or two, if you will have me."

"Indeed, we are very willing. Nell, you must do the honours of your lodging-house dinner," Charles said, laughing, "if we are to have any at all, but I suppose Peggy has provided something or other."

"Mutton chops, most likely; that is the inva-

riable first-day dinner in lodgings. Can you stoop to such vulgar fare, Lucy?"

"No matter if it were bread and cheese. However, as a preliminary step, Helen, make your husband resume his former position, or I shall send for a hackney coach and depart. No obstinacy, Mr. Brotherton, remember you are not wanted to play agreeable this evening, Helen and I have so much to say to each other that you may be quiet with a safe conscience, or even go to sleep if your like."

We had a merry dinner enough, Peggy waiting in her best gown and cap, and eyeing the grand London lady with considerable awe. Then in the evening we gathered round the fire, and while Charles, tired out by the exertions of the last few days, fell asleep on the sofa, I sat and listened with half-wonderment to the careless, clever talk that made the hours run so swiftly.

But Lucy had melancholy tidings to tell me, tidings that filled me with regret and pity, and a shadowy self-reproach. Poor Mrs. Clayton was

dead. She had sold her house in London a few months ago, and gone down into Devonshire, completely broken in health and spirits, and died there. I could not think of her without bitter tears of sorrowful memory; this poor spirit-crushed, lonely woman, dying alone in an unloved and deserted age, poor Frank's aunt, who loved him as a mother. She had died, I feared, without forgiving me, and I never thought of her but with an accusing sorrow. She had never answered the letter I wrote to tell her of my marriage, and I never now could make my peace with her, since between us lay the great gulf that divides the dead from the living. I sat gazing into the fire as Lucy spoke, my eyes blinded, my heart full of bitter, half-remorseful thought.

"She was hopelessly soured and broken," Lucy said, "before she left town. They had suffered money losses through the roguery of a nephew who managed the banking affairs. Hers

was a weak soul, and the blast of adversity had smitten it to the ground to rise no more."

"Poor, poor thing!"

I wished I could have seen her once again that I might have tried to soften her towards me; I wondered awfully if there had been any one, when from her dim eyes, the world's riches, and joys and mockeries were fading into the darkness of coming night, to whisper something of a better country, "where the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick." But it was the emptiest of vanities to think of this now. One slight encouragement to hope that ere she died she thought forgivingly of me was, as I heard shortly after, that she had left me in her will those pearls she had offered me in the old bright days, and to look upon which was a cruel pain. They may shine some day upon my daughter's neck, but till my joys and sorrows are alike forgotten, they will never see the light.

I was so absorbed in the old sorrowful dreams



stirred up by the news I had heard, that I scarcely felt the touch of Lucy's hand on my shoulder.

"Nell, little woman, you must not cry. Tears on the first night of our meeting are an insult to our friendship. I wish I had not told you this vexing news yet. Come, look up and smile for Charlie's sake, that's well. You have done rightly and bravely, Nelly, and you are happy now, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Matrimony becomes you admirably, little friend," and she passed her hand over my hair with a half-caressing movement. "You are the very prettiest of little wives, and Charlie—he is asleep remember—looks more interesting than ever."

"You don't see him to advantage to-night; he is too weary, as you perceive, to remember his good manners, but sometimes ——"

"Sometimes he is wonderfully handsome, eh, Nell?"

“No, indeed, I never said so,” laughing and colouring in spite of myself.

“I will take it for granted. There is potent magic in happiness, Helen, and you were a good generous young thing to bring sunshine to the heart that loved you so well and strongly,” with a smile that quite altered the proud lassitude of her face.

“But it is nine o’clock,” looking at her watch, “and that rumble of wheels, and that peal of the bell, which you might swear, Nell, was pulled by a jackanapes of a London footman—one of the most despicable varieties of the human race—tells me that the carriage is come. I must depart; I am to go with Victoria to listen to some musical enormities at ten. I shall bring her here to call on you, Nell—nay, I will not have you wake him.” She rose and drew the folds of her Cashmere round her tall, queenly figure, and gave me a kiss on the forehead. “My lord is going through a course of solemn banquets, to atone for his past days of regimen,

may we hope that Mr. and Mrs. Charles Brotherton will be induced—”

“No, indeed, Lucy, thank you, Charles’s health will never stand going out, and we settled before we came to town that we would lead a hermit’s existence.”

“Absorbed in each other, of course; quite right—but make no rash vows, Nell,” with her light laugh; “and now, farewell.”

When she was gone, I sunk into a chair by the fire, and gave myself up to the stream of thoughts my talk with her had set flowing, to bear me away on its current in the shadows of the past.

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We drove the next morning to Russell Square, to see Esther, Charles recruited by a night’s rest, and looking as cheerful as I wished his sister to see him. We took Peggy with us, and derived no end of enjoyment from the dear old soul’s exclamations of wonder at everything on our way—the streets and squares, bright with

the autumn sunshine; the incessant din and rattle of wheels, the shops—amazing palaces to her bewildered eyes—and the streams of people. She was in a perpetually astonished state till we arrived in Russell Square, there to be again profoundly impressed and clearly much awed by the great house, the stately footman that opened the door, the wide staircase, and the imposing air of things in general. She was evidently uncomfortably mystified by the thought that all this magnificence was Miss Nest's, and began to have a dim perception that the same Miss Nest at Holmsley and in Russell Square, must be two very different personages, till she felt her old nursling's arms round her neck, and the illusion vanished.

“And I scarce could believe,” said Peggy afterwards, “that such a mortal grand place, with such a fine chap wi' a lot of floury stuff on his noddle, to let folks in, could be all my darlin' lassie's, till I felt her sweet arms round my neck, and her a kissing o' me so pretty—a poor,

silly, old soul like me—in the midst of her own fine house; she deserves it all, and Lord send she may long enjoy it! And then I know'd my dear for the same as she always were, bless her!”

Nest half stifled her brother with loving welcomes, and pretty congratulations on his improved looks, whispering to me with a grateful moisture in her dark eyes, how wonderfully altered poor dear Charlie was since I married him. We must stay to dinner, and see Tom when he came back from the city. It was so deliciously like home to have us all round her; Maude, in triumphant possession of the baby, was the happiest of mortals, and even Jessie's little wan face looked, I thought, less sad than usual, under the influence of Nest's bright face and sisterly kindness.

Esther announced that she meant to keep her in a perpetual whirl of driving and shopping all day, and “going somewhere” every night, so that she should not have a moment for moping.

Moreover Esther privately informed me afterwards, as a great discovery, that she really thought Jessie liked Steenie very much, for she, Esther, had had a letter from him that morning, saying he meant to return from Paris in about a week, and to stay a few days with her before he went home, and when she had told Jessie, she had given such a glad delighted start and the colour mounted to her forehead.

“Steenie does not know she is here?”

“No, and I don’t mean to tell him. Won’t it be a surprise?” said Nest, with her pretty girl-ish laugh.

What sort of a surprise I thought sadly? and my heart misgave me that it would not be a pleasant one.

In due course Mr. Warrington came home to dinner, receiving my husband and me with the dignified suavity of manner, which always had the effect of nearly depriving me of my ordinary faculties, and as it wearied Charles excessively, it is most probable that an awful silence would



have reigned triumphantly at dinner had it not been for Esther and Maude, whose light hearted natures, Heaven keep them so! no reserve or formality could freeze. Poor Jessie never lifted her eyes from her plate, except to whisper out little frightened answers whenever her magnificent host addressed any observation to her, which happily for her peace of mind was not often. He thawed somewhat after dinner, however, under the influence, perhaps, of a few glasses of port, and became evidently a man of softer material, sitting by a bright fire in his handsome drawing-room, listening to Esther and Maude's singing, and grew very gracious indeed as the hour for saying good night drew near, thereby evincing that he was but human after all.

It was near eleven before we drove home through the lighted streets, with Peggy in a high state of felicitation, both as regarded the splendour of her dear lassie's establishment and the distinguished treatment she herself had received

from her compatriots below stairs, which left her with the impression that "London folk was no ways so high as she had heard tell on."

When we reached home we found on the table Lady Cramworth's cards, which caused Charles much rejoicing at having eluded a visit from more fashionable folk, a race of which he had an amusing dread.

"We shall have to return the call, I suppose," said he with a face of horror that set me laughing.

"No doubt of it."

"Woe is me! with the fetters of matrimony comes the responsibility of the honourable estate, the burden of the usages of polite society."

"Ah! you are repenting already, I see."

"Sorely, Nell. I half wish you had left me alone on my sofa at Holmsley in dignified obscurity. I felt nothing of the worry of this bustling world till you came to plague me with your dark eyes. Why did you drag me from my cool shade into the glare and tumult of fashionable existence?"

“Perhaps you had been vegetating in the cool shade too long. However, as I have brought you into this formidable publicity, I hope you will not disgrace me.”

“And am I, myself, absolutely to call in Park Lane, and bow, and simper, and exchange polite courtesies, Heaven help me! with a fashionable lady, a live lord’s wife, with an estate in Monmouthshire, and I know not what besides. Can’t you call without me, Nell? nothing ruffles your graceful self-possession, and compose a lugubrious story—”

“Which Lucy could falsify at once? Very probable indeed.”

“I am half dead already from Warrington’s pomposity; he is the most ponderous company, absolutely falling on you like a dead weight and paralysing your senses,” Charles said, sinking wearily into an arm chair, and resting his head on his hand; “fancy living all your days with such a man. Nest must have wonderful elasticity

of nature to endure him. Nell, shall we be expected to drive often in Russell Square?"

He seemed so intensely weary that I had not the heart to scold him, so I kissed him instead, thinking with a sigh how pale and fragile he looked, and then insisted on his going to bed instantly.

Next morning's post brought me a note from Jessie, with these words written in pencil, "Captain Brotherton will be here in a week; what ought I to do—go or stay? Tell me." Poor Jessie! a keen and miserable effort it must have cost her little throbbing heart to write these cold words. Oh! Steenie, when will you wake?

I was so long pondering perplexedly over the answer I must send, that Charles began to laugh at me, and at last I could think of no better or wiser words than

"DEAR JESSIE,

"Stay and be brave.

"H. B."

For who could have been so relentless as to tell the poor child she ought to go home—the iron truth?

This done, as it was a cool, bright, mellow afternoon, I persuaded Charles to come out with me into Kensington Gardens, he congratulating himself that it was a great deal too late to call on Lady Cramworth that day. The groups of people, the passing carriages and riders, and the newness of the scene amused him, so we strolled on contentedly enough till, on turning, we descried two tall stately figures, with a gorgeous footman in the rear, bearing down upon us from a side-walk.

“I wish the earth would swallow us,” Charles muttered, looking an embodiment of misery. No such convulsion of nature took place, and we had to face our doom, Lucy pouncing upon us instantly, and introducing us to her sister, who had been scrutinising us through a tiny gold-eye glass, to Charles’s intense discomfiture. She looked much younger than Lucy, a very fair,

pretty, rather plump, young woman, with quiet, sleepy, blue eyes, very overwhelmingly dressed, and given to laughing every two minutes, for apparently no other reason than to shew her small, white teeth. Her wax-doll beauty looked strange beside Lucy's dark, clever, scornful face, and it was clear that Lucy's was the dominant spirit. Lady Cramworth was extremely gracious especially to my husband; his invalid looks and sweet voice, with his evident need of kindness, held forth a strong claim for pity and interest, and usually won them.

After a stroll down the garden we parted, under a perfect avalanche of civilities from Lady Cramworth, hopes that our visit to town was likely to be a long one, that she should see a great deal of us, and various other soft speeches of the same kind, which Charles repaid by ungratefully observing, as we crossed the road on our homeward way, what an intense blessing it was to get out of the suffocating society of fashionable ladies.



"I hope you don't apply that uncivil remark to Lucy Esham," I said.

"No, I'll make an exception in her favour. Lucy was not intended to be a fine lady, she has honesty about her, sense, shrewdness, and kindly feeling shines out through the mask she is forced to wear."

And I began to speculate dreamily how many masks were worn in this Vanity Fair of ours, and what pale, weary, heart-sick faces there were that pined beneath them.

## CHAPTER VI.

ESTHER, Maude and Jessie came the next day to take a lodging-house dinner with us, and the latter took me aside at the first opportunity, and thanked me with a grateful kiss for my decision. "It would seem so strange, so rude to Esther, if I were to go home so suddenly," said she, with a pleading look.

"Yes, Jessie, dear little hypocrite, that you are; and I fancy besides that the heart-strings are twisted very closely round the coming guest, and it would be sore work to rend them away."

"It would be wiser, perhaps," with a flush and a sigh, "but I do not mean to be foolish, and he

will not stay very long, I dare say," and I could not quite stifle the thought that it were better he should not come at all unless he "came seeing."

Lady Cramworth speedily commenced putting her friendly intentions towards Charles and me into execution, by sending us an invitation to a large dinner party, a fortnight off, which of course we declined, Charles being utterly unfit to go through such an ordeal, and I nowise inclined for it. I am afraid her ladyship began to consider us as very hopeless and impracticable people, and quite undeserving of her favour, but Lucy, who was with me when the invitation arrived, informed me, slightly to my amazement, that it was a polite illusion, for her sister was well aware that we should not come, and had already filled up our places.

"I was so sure that it would be only an empty compliment," said she, "that I tried hard to persuade Victoria not to send that genteel mockery, but for once she was obstinate and would have her own way. So we deliberately, and with

malice aforethought invited you to dinner, feeling morally certain that you would not come. You must think us arrant hypocrites, Helen."

I don't know what prompted me to ask presently if Esther and Mr. Warrington were to dine with Lady Cramworth, nor why I felt the next moment that it was a silly question.

"Not this time," Lucy said laughing. "You must know, innocent little friend, that Russell Square merchants, estimable and influential folk as they are, don't always commingle very easily with us West-end aristocrats. They come in with the City people, to whom his lordship sometimes gives a banquet. Don't colour so, Nell, your little puzzled face is really bewitching," and she laughed heartily at my disconcerted looks, while I began to have a dim perception that Russell Square and Park Lane did not somehow form part of the same social category. "You don't comprehend the mystery of 'sets' yet, Nell, and may you never have need to bore yourself with the wearisome tactics of fashionable

existence. You are happy in dwelling outside the charmed circle, keep there if you value peace of mind or freshness of heart."

"In the cool shade, eh, Lucy?"

"Ay, in the cool shade and quiet sunshine, and let the world 'sweep you with her whistling silks' if she will. Is not the rattle of her chariot wheels a discordant din in your ears, Nell? But, come," she continued in her usual careless tone, shaking off the weary look that had for a moment rested on her proud face, "in spite of all my preaching and inveighing against this poor world, which after all is a respectable place enough for reasonable folks, I want you to go to the opera with me to-night."

"To-night?" I echoed.

"Yes, to-night—don't look so thunderstruck, and Mr. Brotherton too. Victoria has a box, and her lord never goes—his opera days are over, he is only fit for an arm-chair and a snore after the important business of the day, namely dinner, is over. So there will be plenty of

room, and I'll call for you in the carriage. What say you?"

"I should like it wonderfully; but Charlie--the fatigue would be too much for him, and I could not leave him all alone."

"Pshaw! where is the great fatigue? There is no walking, and sitting in an opera box is no very exhausting matter, Nell. It would amuse him, I am sure. I remember his fondness for music. Oh! here is himself. I'll manage it, and don't you interfere, Nell. Mr. Brotherton," said she, as Charles made his appearance, "I lay my commands on you to attend me to the opera this evening."

"I am all obedience," returned he bowing.

"There, Helen."

"He does not mean it—you are not in earnest, Charlie."

"I am as sober as a methodist, Nell."

"Victory!" exclaimed Lucy triumphantly. "We will call for you, and there will be



literally no trouble, and I am sure you will enjoy the music. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes," said he, laughing and shaking hands upon it.

"That's right; and Nell, remember you are not to thwart him with your pretty fears and prudent faces. I must rush home now, for it is close upon dinner time. Don't forget, and don't keep us waiting, or the consequences to Victoria's temper may be serious," and she skimmed away, leaving me as usual in an astonished condition.

"You don't really mean to go?" I said to Charles.

"I see you are aghast at my rashness," he answered laughing; "but I feel pretty well to-day, and I have a wonderful desire to hear an opera. And I have not seen the inside of a theatre for so many years—don't laugh—that I really have a very cloudy recollection of what it is like. Wouldn't you like it, Nell?"

"Yes; it will be delightful if you feel strong

enough," I said, kissing his forehead, and wondering whether the faint colour in his cheek warranted such an unparalleled exertion. But his courage did not evaporate as the time drew near: he really seemed pleased at the thought of going, and so we went.

We did not keep our distinguished friend waiting, and accordingly she was all smiles and flatteries. She was very much dressed—rather too much I thought, but that might have been my ignorance—and looked brilliantly pretty, her blue eyes, fair, smooth glistening hair, and white, satin-smooth neck, and shoulders lighting up by night into a really effective picture, to which Lucy's dark proud worn beauty was an excellent foil.

The glistening scene of the opera house, the blaze of light, the music, the brilliant figures broke upon Charles's bewildered senses like a dream of fairyland. It seemed to him coming from the dark, damp November night, from the crowd and din of London streets, like a new,

enchanted world of light, warmth, perfume, ravishing strains, falling on the ear in one successive strain of delight, intoxicating the senses like a magic spell.

Lucy, to whom the business of the stage was a matter of very secondary importance, and who kept sweeping the house with her opera glass during the greater part of it, whispered in my ear more than once her delight at Charles's absorbed face, and teased me by enquiring if any thought of me mingled with his present enjoyment, whilst I, well pleased to see him so, forgot past and future, and gave myself up to the present hour.

Lady Cramworth's glistening figure, with its snowy neck, white braceleted arms, pink cheeks, and long curled yellow tresses, crowned with soft feathery plumes, looked like a shining vision sitting in front of the box, with the full light falling on it. She seemed to be an acknowledged belle, for a crowd of gentlemen were flitting in and out of the box the whole evening

to pay their court to her and Lucy, and I was introduced to more dandies, young and old, than I could ever remember the names of, though all the time she was flatteringly civil to my husband, who sat immediately behind her, and lavished on him her softest smiles, perhaps because he was something new and different from the usual stereotyped fine gentleman, or because she was really pleased with his low, musical voice, and gentle, refined manner.

“Helen, there are the Crawfords,” Charles bent forward and whispered to me, and following his glance, I saw Grace Crawford and her mother in a lower box, with three or four attendant gentlemen.

“Do you know them?” Lucy enquired.

“Yes, very well; they are near neighbours of ours at Holmsley.”

“They have come up to town for the winter, I suppose,” said Lady Cramworth; “the girls are looking handsome to-night, but the mother is the grimmest and most appalling of old Scotch-

women, in her turban and plume. Is my pet Ferdinand with them? do look, Lucy."

"I don't see him, but he'll turn up presently, no doubt, your pets invariably do," Lucy answered, in her old tone.

Her prophecy was fulfilled, for a very few minutes afterwards a soft voice close to my shoulder made me start disagreeably, and I found her ladyship's pet was behind me, she greeting him with her sunniest smiles.

I disliked this man excessively—a nephew of Lady Crawford's, lately returned from Italy, whom I had met two or three times at parties at Haverford, just after my marriage. He was rather good-looking, I believe—or thought so, with very white, brilliant teeth, that he took especial delight in shewing, and extremely sharp grey eyes, whose expression did not invite confidence. He was one of those men—common enough in the world—who always get up overwhelming flirtations with married women, and affect to despise 'misses of sixteen.'

He had an infinite amount of assurance, his vanity was inexhaustible, and he was one of the most fatiguing, and immensely voluble talkers I ever knew; half-an-hour of his low, fluent, rapid chatter—empty as it was—made your head ache, and bewildered your senses. He thought fit, on our first acquaintance, to honour me with very unpleasant notice—a flirtation with a bride he especially affected—and more than once his quietly insolent speeches, spoken always with the same soft voice and air of profound deference, had made my cheek flame, and my pulse quiver. I remember one of these for which I hated him, with all the honest rage my woman's nature. He was glad, he said one day in his courteous whisper, meeting me out riding with Maude, to perceive that I was not always chained to the sofa of the poor boy they had made me marry.

The pleasure of the evening was gone for me when he entered the box, the low buzz of his ceaseless talk close behind me was intolerably irri-



tating and wearisome; I thought the performance never would be over, and when at last the curtain dropped at the concluding scene of the ballet, and we all rose to depart, there was no escape from his arm, for Lady Cramworth had taken possession of Charles. He was delighted, he said, to see Mr. Brotherton look so much better, he had evidently taken a new lease of life.

The usual delay in getting the carriage, with the attendant bustle, and sending to and fro of gentlemen, ensued, and we had to stay some time in the waiting room, Mr. Crawford taking every opportunity of whispering some remark to me with an affectation of easy intimacy, which, though inwardly raging, I had to submit to.

I scarcely knew how long this misery lasted, when suddenly I heard a low inquiry close to my ears from Lady Cramworth.

“Mr. Crawford, who is that beautiful woman?” and at the same moment came a suppressed exclamation and a quick pressure on my arm from Lucy. I looked up and saw Annora! She had just

entered the waiting-room, with a party of gentlemen, but (my dazzled eyes marked this with insufferable pain) with none of her own sex near her, leaning on Mr. Wilson's arm, laughing and talking gaily, brilliantly dressed, and looking—oh! Heavens!—how exquisitely beautiful, with no mark of guilt and shame on the dazzling cheek, no brand on the proud forehead to tell what she was.

“What a lovely creature!” said Lady Cramworth, “do tell me who she is, Mr. Crawford?”

She passed close to us; I could have touched her dress, caught her white arm with its glistening gems. She saw me; our eyes met for an intolerable moment—an age of agonizing memories—we looked into each other's faces. Hers was white and wan, and her lips worked convulsively, as though she strove to speak, but he on whose arm she leant whispered sharply in her ear, and scowling at me, drew her rapidly on just as there came a cry of “Lady Cramworth's carriage.” I dimly felt that Lucy was speaking

to me, but my brain was sick and my senses swam, and her voice sounded indistinct.

"The carriage is come; we are going," she whispered, "do you hear me, Helen? You are so white—are you going to faint? Be calm, poor child, for Heaven's sake;" she spoke very kindly; "remember how many eyes are on us, be strong, Nell."

"Oh, take me away, take me away."

I felt her strong, sustaining hold on my arm, as she almost dragged me to the carriage, and the cold damp night air on my forehead for a moment revived me a little; but the drive home was a confused dream of which I have no recollection. I only remember shrinking back into a corner, shivering with speechless shame and misery, returning vague answers to Lady Cranworth's gracious inquiries as to how I liked the opera, which singer I admired most, &c., and to Lucy's friendly whispers.

But we reached home at last, and I was free, by the dim firelight, to sob out my bruised heart

on my husband's breast, and to be soothed under the keen sting of my shame, sorrow, and degradation, by his tender words. And Nora, my childhood's fallen star, and I had met at last! But not one of my old terrible dreams had equalled the dread reality—better to have seen her, pale, tattered, famine-struck, creeping towards the dreadful river, and to have saved her then, than thus in the wantonness of her sin-stained beauty, glorying in her shame.

## CHAPTER VII.

I SAW Lucy again on the evening of the next day ; she came in the dull, heavy, November twilight, and found me alone (for Charles was asleep in his room) thinking over the fire, tracing mournful pictures in the red, hot coals. I had not been out, for Charles was tired by his last night's dissipation, and besides some weary oppressive fancy that all the world must know my unhappy secret, and a sick dread of seeing again the face of last evening that had haunted my broken sleep all night, made me unwilling to brave the sunshine. I was grateful for the sight of Lucy's handsome friendly face,

for her hearty kiss, and the softened kindness of her usually careless manner.

She must have thought all reference to last night worse than useless, for she did not allude to it, but went on talking on other subjects in her ordinary, indifferent, half-jesting way, but with a touch of gentleness in her proud, clear voice, which half unconsciously I felt as compassionate kindness for me.

“You did not seem much to admire Victoria’s knight, our cavalier of last evening, Nell?” she said, with a sharp glance at me.

The very thought of him cost me a sharp pang of anger just then. “No, I have met him before in the country. I have a strong aversion to him and his insolence.”

“You are right; I believe he is a thorough rascal, one of the world’s gentlemanlike, agreeable villains. It is strange,” she went on, speaking more to herself than to me; “Crawford is rather a pet of Victoria’s; he has been riding with her this very afternoon. In short he is a



*preux chevalier* of ours. I have danced and flirted and talked nonsense with him myself over and over again. It's a strange system, this sweet world of ours. Let him knock a man down on the high road and rob him, and the law will be at his throat. Society whose decrees are those of the Medes and Persians, which alter not, will shut her doors upon him, shake her virtuous head at his name; but he may wound, insult, and trample upon as many hearts as he pleases, steep his soul in as much silent guilt as he has a fancy for, and as long as he keeps a gentlemanlike outside, and a good coat on his back, this same Society, respectable matron as she is, will take him to her bosom, pure-minded girls will go floating round the room in his arms, never dreaming that a ruffian's heart throbs under the silvery voice and the embroidered waistcoat. A villain in good clothes is a respectable character enough, but who cares for genius, virtue, learning and piety with their elbows out?

There is 'something rotten in this state of Denmark,' but who can help it?"

I could not, I thought, as I leant my head wearily against the sofa, and thanked Heaven that this great bugbear, the world, and I had not much to do with each other.

"Our hot, withering atmosphere does not suit you, Nell, white flower as you are, you would fade if long exposed to it. Home is your proper sphere. You look like a broken lily to-night, and all my folly has failed to extract one smile as yet. I know there is one awful sorrow, for which my lips have no power of comfort, Helen. Heaven help you!"

Her voice as she spoke this was very low and tender, with a sincere pity in it.

"You are very kind, dear Lucy. There would seem no help in Heaven or earth for that woe."

My heart smote me for the faithless words as soon as uttered.

“Hope better things, Nell,” but in her voice there was not much echo of hope.

“How beautiful she looked; the same old lustrous beauty. And yet, Lucy, it were better had we found her in the streets—on the brink of the river, than thus.”

My unutterable sorrow swelled up into my throat and choked me.

“He has not deserted her yet,” Lucy said in the low suppressed tone in which one speaks of a shameful subject; “but she stands on the brink of a volcano. He is a notorious gambler, and the world says a ruined man.”

A tottering ruin, Nora, for those white, gemmed arms to cling to; a miserable idol for which to lose home, friends, name, and fame, to wreck a life, and imperil a soul! Lucy stayed late with me that night, and when she went away I felt I loved her better than I ever did before. We renewed, too, our old acquaintance with Dr. Twynford, who came to call on us in his cosy carriage with the fat horses, and apo-

plectic coachman Charles and I remembered so well, bringing his wife with him, a cheerful, kindly, pleasant woman, from whom I received much kindness in after times, and have cause gratefully to remember.

We kept up our wonted warm intercourse with Russell Square, but Esther was delicate just now, and forced to keep a good deal on the sofa, and forbidden much exercise, to her great vexation. It was so provoking, she said, when she wanted particularly to amuse poor Jessie, who must find it terribly dull. And Maude was just the least bit sulky at the loss of her anticipated rides in the park, which the little country girl gloried in, and very cross with Steenie for not coming back to escort her.

But Steenie came at last, without any warning, one dark night, taking us all by surprise, and discomposing Mr. Warrington dreadfully, by such a lawless mode of arrival. He did not come to see Charles and me on the morning after, somewhat to our astonishment—and our first

sight of him was in the evening, when Esther asked us to dinner, to meet the wanderer; Mr. Warrington was engaged to drive out, for which deprivation, I am afraid, we none of us afflicted ourselves very deeply; but in spite of the relief of his absence, our party was not a merry one—a blank restraint, which no one could account for, but which all felt, hung over us. Even Maude's prattle could not enliven us, and when she rallied Steenie on having left his spirits in Paris, there seemed good ground for the accusation. Jessie was pale, silent, and cold as a snow-drift, seldom lifting her eyes from her almost untouched plate, and flushing restlessly whenever Steenie spoke to her, which was not often.

He had met Charles and me as affectionately as ever, but there was a tone of languor even in his warm welcome, and he looked so genuinely ill and unhappy that my indignation melted into air, and the sharp lecture I had reserved for his private ear was forgotten under the influence of

his pale, almost suffering face, and absent, nervous manner. Maude bantered him unmercifully on his changed looks, and protested that he must have left his heart behind him, in the hands of some bewitching *Parisienne*, till his sharp impatience at her jesting silenced her.

Matters were not much brighter when we adjourned to the drawing-room; Esther felt tired and unwell, and went to her room to lie down; Maude, indignantly declaring that we were one of the dullest family parties she had ever been plagued with, ran up to the nursery to see her god-daughter put to bed; Charles, finding nobody disposed to talk, took refuge in an arm-chair and a folio of old engravings; and Jessie, sitting as far off by the table as she could, began to work with wonderful assiduity and nervous speed. I believe that only I, attentively observing her from time to time, saw how the little swift hands trembled. Steenie, after fidgetting restlessly about the room for some minutes, and returning vague answers to all my



attempts at conversation, sat down beside me on the sofa, and leant his head on his hand. I really and deeply pitied him, felt for his nervous wretchedness, for his altered looks, and wanted very much to say something kind and comforting, but knew not how.

“Your visit to Paris has not improved your looks or your spirits, Steenie,” I said at last, feeling that I must speak.

He answered in a low tone, and with evident unwillingness to talk on the subject, “that he was not well, that he had been ill in Paris--his arm had been painful lately.”

I saw Jessie’s little, restless hands pause a moment, and the drooping face lifted with an anxious glance.

“Poor fellow,” I said. “I am very sorry, Steenie. I hope your old school-fellow took care of you; it must be wretched enough to be ill away from home and friends in a foreign country. But you never told us this in your letters, Steenie.”

"No; where was the use? It would have been absurd to frighten my mother, and make you all anxious; besides my left-handed productions of late have been few and far between. I had nothing pleasant to tell, and writing is a trouble now. I suppose I am tired too. I have had rather more racketing than suits my strength since my wanderings."

"And yet you would not come home. We have been expecting you for a very long while."

"I made resolutions to start every day, and as regularly broke them. I was very wretched in Paris, and yet I had no particular desire to see my native land again just now."

He spoke all this in the same low, suppressed tone, without raising his eyes, and preserving the same languid attitude. Jessie's hands fluttered over her work as rapidly as ever, but I saw she was listening intently—scarcely daring to breathe lest she should lose a word.

"And this is the dreariest time for London, it is a sepulchre of mud and fog. Will you go

down to Holmsley, and let Aunt Mary nurse you?"

"Not yet. You are very anxious to get rid of me," he returned impatiently.

A little quivering sigh from Jessie was an effectual contradiction to his words. I know not if he heard it. Silence fell on us for a moment.

"How fast you work, Jessie," Steenie said awkwardly enough, more to break the oppressive stillness than for anything else.

She made some inaudible answer, and the little white hand plied faster than ever; perhaps he saw that on one thin finger glistened the ring he had given her in brighter times.

He rose and went over to her side, and laid his hand on the engrossing work. "Come, Jessie," he spoke as with a desperate effort to say something kind, "you must not be so absorbingly busy on the first evening of my return; you have absolutely no word or look for an old friend, you treat me like a stranger."

Her lip trembled, and she raised her eyes half reproachfully, but very quietly, and looked him in the face; but the pallor of his handsome features, his vacant sleeve, smote her woman's heart, and her glance drooped again sorrowfully.

"I am so sorry you have been ill," said her tremulous girlish voice.

"Won't you sing me something, Jessie? just one of your pretty Scotch songs, to remind me of bye-gone times. We are all dull enough—half asleep I believe, and want something to awaken us."

Perhaps she did not try to resist the music of the low, pleading tones, but rose and went without a word to the piano, and presently as we listened, her sweet childlike voice broke the stillness of the room. But what made her choose one of the saddest and sweetest of Scottish melodies—"The Land o' the Leal?"

Steenie listened breathlessly, and Charles, thrusting aside his engravings, looked at me with

a vague anxiety. How mournful and thrilling was the pathos of the sad young voice!

“I’m wearing awa’, Jean,  
Like snow when in thaw, Jean,  
I’m wearin’ awa’, to the Land o’ the Leal.  
There’s nae sorrow there, Jean,  
There’s nae cauld nor care, Jean,  
The day is aye fair, in the Land o’ the Leal,”

The voice went tremblingly on to the last verse, then stopped, wavered, sunk into a sob.

“Jessie, Jessie!” faltered Steenie, starting from his chair, and going to her side.

I don’t know what he said, bending over her in that shadowy corner, but I saw that he held her hand, and a shadow of a hope soon to be crushed fluttered at my heart.

Jessie, with her usual power of self-command, was calm and quiet again. She could not think what had made her so foolish—she was nervous, she supposed, and the song was such a sad one, and—and—

Here Charles lit a candle, and muttering something about wanting a book from the library,

left the room, and some indefinable impulse prompted me to walk to the window, and half shrouded by the heavy curtains look out on the lights in the square, and the dark November night.

Steenie seemed determined not to be forced into a love scene; he turned from the piano, and walked towards the fire-place. Perhaps the softening influence of the low, thrilling, sorrowful voice had passed away; I almost hated him just then for his obstinacy.

Jessie followed him, not, I am convinced, from any new-born hope having arisen within her, but from an urgent, trembling desire to speak, to know her fate, and look it bravely in the face, to end this long, weary, heart-sick waiting. He stood with his arm on the chimney-piece and his head leaning against it, looking silently into the fire. At last he spoke:

“We seem strange and cold to each other, Jessie, I—I scarcely know why. Is the remembrance of past times so bitter to you?”



"Why talk of it? It is a mockery," she said in her low sad voice.

"Is it? I suppose it must be," with a deep self reproach in his tone.

They had either forgotten or did not heed my presence.

"And yet it is dreary to think so. Why can we not be friends as we always were? I dinna ken, Jessie," with an attempt at a smile.

"There is no reason why we cannot be friends, but there is much," her voice shook, but she went on bravely, "that we should understand each other, that we should know that there is naught between us, that you may go your way and I mine, untroubled and at peace."

Bravely she spoke the cruel words, poor little fainting heart.

"Can you speak so coldly, so unkindly to me?" Steenie said passionately, his soul melted by her earnest, quiet, sorrowful gentleness.

"Not unkindly—I would not for the world—but plainly, honestly, is it not better so?" She spoke half appealingly. "I know I am weak

and foolish, but I would for once be brave now; you must not hinder me. Forgive me if I mistook you—if I have done you wrong in thought—if my heart has rebelled and cried out against you for what was no fault of yours. But it is not fit that I should wear the ring that you put upon my finger a year ago with so many tender words, which you would fain forget now. It must vex you to see it there. Take it back.”

She drew it from her little hand very quietly and calmly, and held it out to him.

“Jessie, Jessie, listen to me,” he cried almost despairingly.

“There is no need I should listen, you have nothing to tell me,” she said, still speaking very quietly, but with an intense mournfulness that touched me deeply, and made Steenie wince like one in pain. “A cloud has come between us—it may not be your fault. I am not angry with you, Steenie. But the ring you must take back, for I will not—I must not wear it, it is not fit. I think—I am afraid,” an accent of sorrowful indignation rising in her sad subdued voice,

“that you did deceive me once, Steenie. Perhaps you deceived yourself, too, but I forgive you from my heart. We shall always be good friends.”

Perhaps she could not trust herself to say more—perhaps voice and courage were fast deserting her, for she turned, leaving the ring in his hand, and quietly and noiselessly left the room. Her step did not shrink or falter, and she held her head more erect than I had seen it for a long time, and as she glided across to the door there was a dignity, a womanly grace and pride in the little, slight, childish figure, that I wondered at. But she was gone, and the door closed upon her, and Steenie flung himself on the sofa and hid his face with a groan; and I came out from my hiding place, more sorrowfully and heavily perplexed than I had gone into it.

“Helen, I am a wretch,” he muttered despondently without raising his head.

I had no comfort to give him. Anger, perplexity, sorrow, filled my heart. “You have no one to blame but yourself,” I said coldly. “You

will not make amends for the wrong you have done."

"How can I?"

He rose into a sitting posture, and thrusting back his dark curls from his forehead as though their pressure pained him, gazed wearily into the fire, as though seeking counsel there, and again pity for his pale worn features, and the heart sufferings in them, nearly quenched my anger.

"It is easily done; Steenie."

"It may seem easy, but its difficulty no one but myself can imagine. I am a weak wretch—how I quailed just now before the pure true eyes of that poor child! Why cannot her youth, her sweetness, her good, gentle, innocent nature satisfy my perverse heart? I will tell you why it cannot," he lowered his voice and spoke with intense earnestness. "I will tell you why her goodness and her beauty shew dim and misty. Because the perished dream of my boyhood has started up into life again before my eyes—because the star of my youth, though fallen and

polluted, has shone again upon me. Helen, I have seen Nora."

I could not suppress a sudden cry. I clasped my hands together, and trembled violently.

"I saw her here, in London, this very day," he pursued, speaking with hurried excitement, "in a carriage in the Park; passed close to her, as close as I am to you, looked her in the face, our eyes met. It was an open carriage, and she had stopped for a moment to speak to some one on horseback. The villain who ruined her, Wilson, with whom I fought at Brussels, was not with her, thank Heaven! I would rather not picture the ecstasy of passion, the horrible sense of wrong, the sight of him would have cost me, and I have no right arm now to avenge her. She was as brilliantly lovely as ever; sin and shame have not crushed and defiled her beauty yet. She has never seen me (except that one passing glimpse in the Bois du Boulogne) since I lost my arm, but she knew me, God help her! I would have spoken to her, called her by her name, but pity for her withheld me—she turned

so ghastly white and shuddered so. As I passed on, I heard one of the men who were round her carriage ask her who I was. I did not stay to hear her answer. But oh, Nell! the agony of her look will haunt me till I die—the pity, terror, remorse, unspeakable shame!”

He groaned and covered his eyes with his hand.

“I have suffered the like horror, Steenie, poor fellow! I too have met her, looked her in the face. I have so seen her that it were better to have seen her dead. Steenie, my dear brother, there is no comfort for such grief as ours; but the thought of God’s infinite mercies—”

“I know it, I know it,” he faltered, “but, fallen daughter of sin as she is, I love her with my whole soul. I know she is a guilty degraded thing, that she has trampled upon the heart that was all hers, and wronged me cruelly and shamefully. But we do not know—in the full glow of life and beauty, dazzled by the flatteries and the glitter of a world all new to her—how strongly tempted she might have been. And



she fell—God help and forgive her! and my brilliant dream went out in ashes, for my wife she can never be. But in my inmost heart, in the tender shrine of my dearest memories, there is still the pure image of what she was, undefiled by touch of shame or wrong—my love, my boyhood's glory, my Annora."

A long deep silence that I almost feared to break, it seemed so like a voiceless knell over the lost, fell upon us. Steenie broke it at last.

"I must leave this," he said in a low tone, "after what has happened to-night, it would not be pleasant for Jessie and me to be daily meeting, living in the same house. I cannot think calmly yet of her sweet, quiet, sorrowful words, Heaven bless her! they are like a serpent sting to me. So I must bear all dear Nest's indignant amazement, and depart—take a lodging somewhere. I could not go down to Holmsley now, the quiet would drive me mad, and I know my mother would find me altered, and that would fret and vex her."

"Will you come and stay with us? We can devise a room for you."

"No, dear Nell, with all thanks for your sisterly kindness." He took my hand and kissed it affectionately. "I am so moody and restless just now, that I should be a most disagreeable inmate, an irksome intruder upon your and Charles's happiness. I am so glad and grateful for that happiness, Nell," he spoke with something of his old bright boyish smile, "and how much better and brighter Charlie looks, poor boy, now he has a loving little wife to take care of him. We all owe you a large debt, dear good girl."

"Oh, hush, Steenie."

The old, unworthy feeling came over me as he spoke. The entrance of the servant with tea, and Maude's light step tripping down stairs from the satisfactory settlement of the baby, prevented further talk, alike painful and fruitless. Perhaps one of the sorest additions to such grief as his and mine then was, is the heartfelt conviction of its uselessness—that "we

sorrow as those who have no hope," that in such woe as this, all sobs and moans, and frantic prayers, are powerless to lessen by one jot the weight on the oppressed soul. "It must be so," says the awful mysterious word of Him whose judgments are inscrutable, and His ways past finding out.

Jessie did not come down again, Maude said her bed-room door was locked, and that she answered from within that she had a headache and wanted no tea; and Maude herself, after delivering this news, sat silent, playing with her tea-spoon, and with a hopelessly mystified look clouding her bright face. Charles looked anxious and dissatisfied, and Steenie ill and wretched—he complained of his arm being painful, and went to his room immediately after tea; and I went home, a sore weight on my troubled heart, and broken visions, and distempered fancies haunted my restless sleep all night.

## CHAPTER VIII.

IT was with no surprise that, in three or four days from this time, I heard that Jessie was going home, and although Esther and Maude both affectionately opposed her resolution with all their power, she remained firm to her purpose. And perhaps though I regretted very much to lose the little, gentle, sorrowing face, I inwardly applauded her courage.

She wrote to tell her mother of her coming, and Mrs. Macdonald, glad as she was to see her lassie, could not help acknowledging herself "aye surpreessed that the bairn should ha' wearied sa sune o' that muckle London."

Jessie came to wish us good bye, and the sight of her overcame all my brave resolutions, and

made me cry like a child. I did not want her to go then, I could not bear the thought of her drooping and fading away in the quiet, dull cottage at home, far from us all, away from Steenie and the possibility of his repentance.

But Jessie said, with a brave attempt at a smile, for a kind of quiet strength seemed borne to her from the very depths of her sore, disappointed, weary young heart, a help that was not of man's giving, that anything was better than suspense (the weary waiting, the consuming anxiety, are over now, Jessie), and she meant to try in earnest now to forget the past, and hope for the future, but there was not much hope in the little languid voice. She could do this better at home, and so with many tears, and an earnest silent prayer for her, I let Jessie go, and very dreary and heavily disappointed I felt when her sorrowful blue eyes, and small, childlike figure had flitted away and left me.

Maude went home with her, to take care of Uncle Edward, and to keep house, for it was settled that Aunt Mary should come up to Lon-

don to nurse Esther, whose trial was very near at hand. Poor Nest herself was grievously vexed at this changed and dreary aspect of affairs, angry with Jessie for going away, and angrier still at Steenie's unaccountable, wilful obstinacy, at his altered looks and desponding spirits, and from the conviction that she could do nothing to help anybody, fretted and worried herself extremely, much to Mr. Warrington's indignation at having the health of his hoped-for heir imperilled by such indiscretion. Steenie had left Russell Square, saying he was too restless and miserable to conform to the regular ways of his brother-in-law's stately steady-going household: he took lodgings near the Strand—he wanted, he said, to be in the noisiest part of the town to drown thought. He had met several old friends, officers of his former regiment, and he spoke very indefinitely of going home—the dullness of Holmsley would be insupportable.

I saw that this was a perilous crisis in his life. The spring of action seemed broken by the great wrong and sorrow that had darkened his ex-



istence—the old stirring memories of his soldier's life seemed forgotten. He spoke bitterly of the world, and everything in it; he grew languid, reckless, and despondent. I began to have dreary misgivings about him, and I rejoiced that Aunt Mary was coming so soon to London, and hoped that her mother's hand and her strong loving heart might win him back to better things and truer hopes.

Lucy Esham was a comfort to me in this time of dim fears and forebodings. She was well inclined to take a woman's interest in the young, handsome, wounded soldier, whose mournful story I had told her; but Steenie would never be persuaded, much to my grievance, to meet her advances.

He had grown shy in his unhappiness, had lost all his former bright spirits and gay confidence, and invariably beat a rapid retreat whenever he happened to be sitting with Charles and me, and Lucy was announced—to her half amusement, half vexation. Thus stood matters, in this dreary, disappointing, undecided fashion,

when Lady Cramworth invited my husband and me to what Lucy called a very small and unpretending musical misery. Some celebrated singers were to perform, and as she knew Mr. Brotherton adored music, her ladyship would hear of no excuse. Charles agreed to go, but as usual, matters ended in his feeling too lazy and languid when the time for dressing arrived, and in my being obliged, in a very dissatisfied state of mind, to leave him with a sharp scolding to the quiet enjoyment of his arm chair, slippers, and a good fire, and brave the terrors of a fashionable party alone.

I have no distinct remembrance of anything besides the one event of that evening. I recollect a brilliantly lit room, teeming with glistening figures, very hot and close, and a great deal of Italian singing to which everybody listened in awful silence, and with faces of mystified rapture, most of it being poured from the throat of a long suffering man, with an unpronounceable name, and in a melting state of heat, with very long moustaches and spectacles. I re-

member being graciously received by Lady Cramworth, whose smooth waxen beauty looked really brilliant in the profusion of light, and feelingly upbraided for not having brought Mr. Brotherton by force, and also being presented to Lord Cramworth, whom I had not seen before, an irascible old gentleman, in a brown wig, blue coat, and fiery complexion, who gave me to understand in the five minutes' conversation he honoured me with, "that he wouldn't give a brass farthing for all the noise of these foreign fellows, and if it wasn't for my lady's confounded (only he used a much stronger term) nonsense he'd never let them show their hairy faces inside his doors."

It was rather late in the evening, and I was thinking of a noiseless retreat, when Lucy, sheltered by a deafening duet that was going on between a hirsute gentleman and a languid lady in pink, whispered to me, "Good heavens, Helen! I am so angry. Victoria must have asked him without my knowledge," and following her eyes I saw, evidently just arrived and

mingled with a group of gentlemen near the door, Mr. Crawford.

The dread of his speaking to me turned me sick, but I had no power of avoiding him, and his sharp eye had already detected me, for I saw him softly edging his way round the room to where I sat, and presently felt his voice close to my ear, as he seated himself immediately behind me and bent forward with his courteous smile. I suppose some common-place civilities were his first words.

The duet was over, and a loosened hum of voices filled the room—he raised his tone.

“I have something to tell you, something that concerns you very deeply, something that touches your sister. Will you listen to it?”

A cold shiver of dread seemed to turn my blood from fire to ice. I held my breath.

“I hear Miss Esham proposing a quadrille—they are forming one already. It is useless, I suppose, to ask you to dance with me?”

“I do not mean to dance to-night.”

“I see,” he said with his low laugh, “that

nothing can conquer your unjust prejudices. But you will hear what I have to tell you. It cannot be told here, in this crush; we are near the door, and can slip out easily without attracting notice, will you trust yourself with me for a few minutes in that little ante-room? We shall be quiet there, and I will not detain you long. Can you not even trust me thus far? Don't shake your head—you will repent it if you do not hear what I have to tell you. I swear solemnly that it concerns you deeply—that I mean you no harm—that when I have told you you shall be molested no more by me.”

There was such an unusual earnestness in his voice, something so different from his ordinary half mocking courtesy, that my desperate, terrified longing to know his tidings overcame my powerful dislike of him.

Almost without knowing what I did, I placed my hand on his arm, and suffered him to lead me from the room, guiltily conscious of Lucy's amazed eyes following me, and of the stares of those immediately around us.

We reached the ante-room, which was empty : he drew the curtain across the doorway, and I found myself, with a shudder that I could not suppress, alone with him. I waited breathlessly for him to begin, but his usual fluency of speech seemed to fail him. He hesitated, and looked almost embarrassed.

“ Will you tell me? I am impatient to hear—”

“ It is no pleasing news. I am afraid.” There was some touch of human feeling in his voice, and he looked at me with something like pity. “ Am I right in believing that you have some interest in that beautiful woman we saw that night in the waiting room at the opera.”

“ Yes. You know,” and my eyes drooped as I made the avowal, “ that she is my sister—at least that I have always loved and looked upon her as such, though now she is lost to me. How you knew it I cannot tell, but you do, for you called her so just now. Does what you have to tell me concern her?”

My whole frame shook with an icy fear, a dread foreboding; I looked imploringly at him.



“It does. I will tell you at once, there is no use delaying it. Wilson is dead—shot in a duel this very day.”

My brain reeled, I caught at a chair to save myself from falling.

“Sit down, for Heaven’s sake!” said my companion in a voice of terror, “shall I get you some water?”

I struggled mightily to fling off my weakness, to nerve myself to hear the rest. I pressed my hands over my forehead to calm my disordered senses, and then came a feeling of incredulity—it might not be true.

“It is not certain—how do you know it?” I gasped rather than spoke.

He had made some offer of supporting me, but I shrank from him, and he withdrew his arm with a half suppressed smile.

“It is true; I am ready to swear it. It will be all over London to-morrow, you will see it in the papers. I was an eye witness, not of the duel—I never countenance those lawless affairs—but of the quarrel that led to it. It originated

at the card table, over a game of *écarté*. They fought at daybreak, I believe, in a lonely part of Regent's Park, and Wilson fell. I knew the man who shot him. He and the seconds have escaped to France."

I gasped again for breath. I felt myself staring at him with horror-struck, incredulous eyes.

"You doubt me; but it is true, by Heaven! Wilson has long been a ruined man, hopelessly in debt, and a great gamester. They were never married. What becomes of his mistress?"

He said these words that cut me to the soul, slowly and deliberately, looking at me with his cruel, unwinking eyes.

"Oh, Nora, Nora! Let me go home," I said wildly.

"I am sorry for her," he said eagerly. "You may not believe me, but I swear I am sorry. She was such a handsome creature, I could find it in my heart, if I but knew where she was, to seek her out and offer her— but don't shrink

away from me with such horror in your dark eyes. Where are you going?"

"Home—if I walk there."

"No need of that; take my arm and we'll find the carriage. Come, forget and forgive the past, for I swear I am sorry for that poor devilish handsome girl. What, you won't? Well, you shall have your own wilful way. But take my arm for the sake of appearances."

He led me down stairs, found a carriage waiting for some one else, and put me in it. I did not see till I reached my own door that he was on the coach box—perhaps some touch of compassion for me in my misery had roused the little manliness in his nature—and on seeing me indoors he drove off again.

And before me, through the visions of the long night watches, was the face of my ruined sister, white, forlorn, dying, calling on me, beseeching me with clasped, outstretched despairing hands; and heavy on my soul, night and day, lay the thought of what was before her, in dread perspective—want, famine, a nameless

and dishonoured grave — the streets, and the river.

It was true—an account of the duel and its fatal ending filled a column of the newspapers next morning. All the fashionable world were talking of the shocking story over their chocolate, it was the universal theme of conversation till its newness was rubbed off, and people grew tired of it.

And Annora! where was she? Gone into darkness and oblivion—whither no one knew.

It would be useless to dwell on the long, dark, weary month that followed our first knowledge of the terrible story—our unavailing search, our fruitless enquiries, unceasing disappointment, till hope grew sick and faint—how Steenie and I walked the streets, till sheer exhaustion drove us home, looking in almost every drooping face, watching and following every crouching figure in worn garments that bore a fancied resemblance to her we sought, and all in vain—how finding her seemed now the one purpose of my life, the object of my prayers, the end and aim of my ex-

istence—how I have started from my sleep thinking I heard her voice sobbing outside my door, and have started up and ran to open it and found only the empty darkness, or how when sitting by the fire with my husband, I have thought I heard a crying on the pavement without, and running breathlessly to the window, have heard only the footsteps of the passers by and the moan of the winter wind. The silence of night seemed to have closed over her. Sometimes I thought, with a freezing horror, that it might be the silence of death—that dreadful river haunted me, its dark, deep, glistening waters, its sweeping current, were ever gurgling and moaning in my ears, with a sound of despair. And so the time went by, in its fast running tide, and Christmas came and we had not found her.

Charles and I were to have spent our Christmas at Holmsley, but we both instinctively felt that we could not leave London now—that to have done so would have been to lose our faintly flickering hope.

Esther, ere this, had a son and heir, and Mr. Warrington was exultant. Aunt Mary had been in Russell Square for the last month, nursing mother and child. I saw her almost daily, and her quiet strength and motherly tenderness were such a support to me that I missed her grievously when she was forced to return home, and taking with her Esther and the new and old baby to spend Christmas. Poor Steenie had been persuaded after great difficulty, and then only by his mother's sorrowful face to come home for a few days, so Charles and I were the only outcasts from the Christmas hearth at the old home this year, which gave us a lonely feeling that we could not quite stifle, and caused Uncle Edward intense indignation, he regarding this annual gathering of the family (and he was not far wrong) as a religious ceremony, the non-observance of which must entail dire calamities on the heads of the offenders.

It was about this time, one bright, clear day in Christmas week, that I came home from a



solitary walk in Kensington Gardens (Charles did not feel well and was disinclined to go out in the sharp frost) and found Lucy in deep conversation with him. I could not but observe that they both gave a very decided start when I entered, and looked (but that might have been my fancy) as if I were not precisely the person they wished to see.

"You have come in too soon, Nell," said Lucy, laughing in her careless fashion, and rising from my low chair, where she was sitting beside Charles's sofa.

"Shall I go out again?" I said, scarcely knowing whether to laugh or be offended.

"No, little simpleton; come here and give an account of yourself."

She read my face like a book with her dark, keen eyes, and laughed at my evident half-puzzled discomfiture. "Whither have you been wandering? If you will go roaming about all alone in this frosty wind, it is but an act of Christian charity to come and amuse your husband."

“And how long have you so conscientiously practised that virtue?”

“She is angry,” laughed Lucy, “she is jealous I truly believe. Oh! Nell, silliest of little women; I had a higher opinion of your understanding than you deserved.”

It was very foolish; but her air of good-natured, conscious superiority vexed me just then, though at other times I was quite ready to submit to it—rather liked it than otherwise. There was no change in Charles’s smile, or in the kiss he gave me, and I felt ashamed at my uncomfortable qualm, but still I fancied that there was an anxious unhappy look on his pale face that I could not account for. But when Lucy went to the piano, and I whispered this to him, he laughingly denied it, and evaded all my enquiries, persisting that there was nothing the matter with him. I did not listen much to Lucy’s brilliant music that evening, and her clever talk seemed somehow to have lost its attraction for me, I can hardly tell why, so that when she left us,

which was not till ten o'clock, I am afraid I was guilty of a sense of relief.

But the next day was Sunday, a bright morning, and when Charles and I went to church together I had forgotten my folly of last night. In the afternoon, I wished to go again, and Charles saying he was tired, I set out by myself, it being but a short distance.

I remember that sermon very well. It was on a tender and merciful text: "Verily, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." I thought of all poor, tempted, struggling souls, of all the lost and fallen, of Annora, for whom I was seeking and praying; and the voiceless prayer went up from my soul that the good Shepherd would seek out, and bring back in His time, my poor lost wanderer. I went home cheered and strengthened.

I wanted to tell Charlie of what I had heard, to have a quiet talk with him over it; but when I reached our lodging, the drawing-room was empty, there was the bright fire and his vacant

arm-chair, but no Charles. Peggy heard my call, and came up stairs from below, where she was having an early cup of tea with the landlady, in her silk gown and Sunday cap.

“Ay, bless thy soul! I thought thee’d be a bit surprised, so I did; but he’s just gone out, is Master Charlie.”

“Gone out! what—alone?”

“Not he—with Miss Lucy; she came rolling up in her fine carriage—more shame for her, as ought to let the poor beasties have their Sunday’s rest, but these grand folks ha’ droll ways—and out she gets—not more, not a blessed ten minutes after ye were gone out—and trips up stairs as fess and smiling as though she were going straight to be married. Well, in she goes to the drawing-room, and was at talk wi’ Master Charlie for about another five minutes, and then they both comes out together, he with his hat on and looking mortal pale, poor dear lad! I were watching ’em from the stairs just above that goes to my room, for, thinks I, ’tis but my duty to see what’s going on, and my missus

out. Well, down they goes, and Master Charlie sings out, 'Peggy,' says he, 'if your missus is in before I am, tell her not to be uneasy,' says he, 'for I shan't be long.' Ay, lad, thinks I, but I'll take my Bible oath she'll be uneasy enou', bless her dear heart, for all that. Howsoever, as I were saying, she flisks her skirts into the carriage, and he after her, the flunkey bangs the door, and off they goes."

"And he said he was too tired to come to church with me—very strange!"

"I'd a blessed mind," said Peggy, rubbing her hands in her apron—as was her wont when excited, "to ask 'em where they was going; but, mayhap, they'd ha' thought it imperence, and would'nt ha' told me right. But cheer up, Miss Helen dear, for if they've gone to Gretna Green, we'll be after 'em, and forbid the banns, that's one comfort."

I could not help laughing at this piece of consolation. "Pshaw, Peggy, they have only gone for a drive; Miss Esham found me out, and thought your master might be dull; it was

good-natured of her to ask him. Go down and finish your tea; I am not a bit anxious."

There was a prevailing warm atmosphere of tea and buttered toast all over the dear old woman, especially in the moist, comfortable glow of her red face. When Peggy had re-descended I sat down by the window, and tried hard to think that this was not strange, but failed utterly in the attempt, and ended by thinking it very strange indeed.

I began to think that my husband, whose strong affections I had now learnt to prize, and grow jealous of, as we always do of a precious thing, had some secret from me, some thoughts, hopes, fears, anxieties, in which I had no share, and the thought grew into a positive distress.

The sunset faded away; the shadows on wall and ceiling thickened and lengthened, the lamps were lit in the streets, the winter darkness was coming on fast, still he did not come. I grew insupportably and dreadfully anxious, a new fear fastened upon me; some accident must have befallen him. I paced up and down the room,



went to the window, listened hopelessly, glanced at the reflection of my white face in the glass, sat down and watched the fire, covered my eyes and prayed that this suspense might end, then started up and walked about again in the restlessness of my nervous terror. Even Peggy's loving old face and affectionate logic failed to comfort me. At last, when near eight o'clock, just as I was wondering how much longer I could bear this agony of suspense, the roll of wheels and a ring at the bell told me he was come.

Peggy rushed down stairs to open the door, and I heard her overwhelming him with a torrent of reproaches for frightening his poor, dear, sweet wife and herself out of our seven senses, and his slow, weary step mounting the stairs with evident difficulty.

I ran out to meet him, and recoiled in terror, he looked so dreadfully weary, so white and worn.

"My dear Helen," he said, half entreatingly.

"Charles! how horribly you have frightened me."

"I am afraid I have, darling; it was not my fault."

"You are so white;" my terror at his looks stifled my indignation: "has anything happened? are you ill?"

"No; only tired to death."

He reached the sofa, and sunk down upon it with a look of utter exhaustion.

"And a nice lad you are," said Peggy, wiping away indignant tears with her apron, "and a blessin' to your family, and to your poor dear wife here, that you ought to be ashamed to look in the face this blessed minnit—to go frightening the dear lamb and me, too, out of our five wits with your freaks and fancies. To go whisking away on the blessed Sabbath with that fine Madam Flounce, Lord mend her! I thought better of ye, Master Charles, and may you be forgiven for deceivin' of me."

"Go away, Peggy; hold your tongue, you old idiot. Did you think we had eloped, Nell?" Charles said with a faint laugh.

"And what were she to think, Lord help her?" demanded Peggy wrathfully.

"Go away, woman!" he returned with the irritability of extreme weariness.

Peggy went down stairs grumbling fiercely.

"Havn't you a kiss or even a word for me, Helen?" Charles said languidly.

I cannot explain nor account for the strange, indefinable feeling or misgiving, I know not what to call it, that held me aloof from him.

"Won't you explain anything?" I faltered, trying hard not to burst into tears. "You do not know the misery, the terror, and suspense you have made me suffer." I spoke this as indignantly as I felt it.

"My own darling, forgive me! Indeed I am not to blame,—only have patience, and you shall know everything, but—I am so exhausted just now."

There was some wine on the table, left there from our luncheon; he rose from the sofa with difficulty, reached it, and poured out a glass, but before he could lift it to his lips, he tottered, and

put his hand to his side with an exclamation of pain.

I flew to him, my anger forgotten in my terror.

"Oh, Charles, dearest, you are hurt—I am sure you are. Lean on me; tell me what it is!"

He reached an arm-chair with my aid, and sunk into it with a faint moan, keeping his hand to his side.

"You will not tell me how this happened. I cannot bear to see you in such torture, and to know nothing."

"Only be patient, Nell," said his exhausted voice.

"These mysteries frighten me, Charles."

"My darling, there are none; don't let your little anxious brain conjure up an army of phantoms. Trust me for a little while, Nell, and—"

The acuteness of the pain stopped him, and as the shoots of agony grew more intense, he laid his head on my supporting arm and fainted.

I thought he was dead, and by the despairing terror that fell like ice upon my heart, I knew

how dear he was to me. To ring for Peggy, and send a terrified message to Dr. Twynford was the work of an instant, and then I was left alone with that white, insensible form, my heart weighed down with an anxious agony, and filled with inexplicable fears.

Dr. Twynford came, gave Charles one sharp glance, told me not to alarm myself, laid him on the sofa, sent Peggy, whose sobs grew alarming, down-stairs, took a pinch of snuff, and proceeded to examine the injury in a business-like fashion. It would be hard to say what a weight was lifted from my heart before he had been five minutes in the room.

"Is he much hurt?" I ventured to ask, looking fearfully up into the oracle's face.

"Not seriously, I hope. He has been over-exerting himself; how's that, Mrs. Charles?"

I felt my ignorance painfully.

"I have had a good deal of walking to-day," Charles said faintly.

"I am sorry to hear it," said the doctor composedly; "the consequences are that you have

strained the muscles of your side, and must not leave the sofa for a month at least."

Charles gave an impatient shudder.

"I am half inclined to say it serves you right, but I see Mrs. Charles has an indignant glance ready for me for being such a monster, so I'll hold my peace. You are quite exhausted—drink this wine; and may I trouble you to bathe his temples, Mrs. Charles? your little white hand is more skilful than mine in such an office."

He did not go away till he had seen Charles in bed, given him a composing draught, and charged him to keep up his spirits; and then after seeing him easier, and sinking into the sleep of exhaustion, took his departure, enjoining me not to spoil my eyes with crying, as all would go well, and promising to send his wife to me in the morning, to make what use I pleased of her. There was comfort in the very creak of his boots, and my courage fell dismally at the loss of his calm, shrewd, jaunty presence, and unruffled confidence.

Charles passed a night of great suffering, and



next morning was too worn-out to raise his head from the pillow. It grieved me inexpressibly as I sat beside him with his thin hand in mine, moistening every now and then his feverish temples and dry lips, and listening with a wrung heart to the low and distressful moans forced from him by intensity of pain, to think that there was any shadow between us, any secret in which I had no share. The slightest allusion to the mystery of yesterday seemed to vex and excite him so much, that I forbore to make any, and sat silently by him with a weight of unexplained dread upon my heart.

Mrs. Twynford came according to her husband's promise, with kind words and friendly offers of aid. She had wonderful experience as a doctor's wife, she said, and I was so young (and foolish, I dare say she thought) that I must let her help me in any way she could. She was such a cheerful, bustling, energetic soul (a handsome, merry-eyed woman besides) that I was greatly cheered by her visit, and thanked her with all my heart. I watched her kind face, nodding from her carriage

window as she drove away with a lightened spirit.

Charles seemed easier as the afternoon came; the intensity of the pain had worn itself out. He even insisted on getting up to prove to me how much better he was, and I aided him to reach the sofa for the sake of a change of position, and arranging the pillows as easily as I could, sat down beside him, prepared to try and keep up his spirits. But I am afraid I stood myself in need of that good office, for the same vague, sick anxiety weighed down my senses, and all my efforts to shake it off were fruitless. Perhaps he saw this.

"Nell, I have a story to tell you," he said, in his low, worn voice.

My troubled eyes met his with an eager, anxious terror I could not suppress.

"My poor darling! I cannot withstand those pleading eyes, that look of suspense on your dear pale face. I must break a promise, and unravel the mystery of yesterday. It is your right to know it, if I have strength."

His exhausted looks frightened me.

"No, Charlie, I will wait; indeed you are too weak to talk now."

"You are not angry with me, little wife?"

"No, no, dearest!" I put back his brown curls, and kissed the damp forehead.

"Little woman, how precious your tenderness is to me. I have a reward for you, Nelly; Annora is found."

I did not believe him at first. I stared wildly and incredulously at him, the tale seemed too heavenly to be real; it was not till he had calmly, in his low, languid tones repeated the blessed words over and over again, that I began to take in their full meaning, to feel them in the depths of my soul, to hide my face and kneel, and cry out my gratitude to the God of infinite mercy.

Annora was found! how, I dared not yet ask—but not dead in the pitiless London streets—not drowned in the dreadful river, whose dark tide had ever been moaning through my dreams, but found living, yet, by her Father's mercy, to be saved and healed, and brought back to her

Redeemer's feet. Then I had to tame down my throbbing senses, and wildly beating heart to listen to my husband's low voice, dearer than ever before for the tidings it had brought me, as slowly and painfully he told me how she had been found.

This was the story. Lucy Esham had lately taken a new maid, and this maid one day while dressing her mistress's hair, told in her ear a pitiful story (for Lucy in a silent way did more good deeds than the world dreamt of, and which if discovered she would cast merciless ridicule upon), of a poor woman who had formerly been a fellow-servant of hers in another place, and who was in great distress.

Lucy made some careless inquiries, and her maid went on to say that this woman had been housemaid to a lady—she had forgotten the name—who lived in great style up to a short time ago; but that there was some story (Lucy's attendant being a moral and well-conducted young person, doubtless added this in a shocked whisper) that the lady,—she was very handsome and much

admired, and dressed splendidly—was not married to the gentleman with whom she lived.

He was a great gambler, she went on to say, and terribly extravagant, and they had constant quarrels; and at last some terrible thing happened, the gentleman was shot in a duel, and the lady fell into disgrace and misery, and the creditors seized on the house and plate and furniture, and all there was, and nobody knew what had become of her: (I could fancy Lucy listening to this with suspended breath).

But this poor housemaid, the story went on, of indifferent character herself, but with the woman's soul in her still, would not leave the unfortunate lady, who had been kind to her, and had stood her friend more than once, and so, when she was cast out, had followed her through all her shame and misery, and shared it with her. Low hadst thou fallen: oh! Nora, proud, beautiful and beloved! when this poor sinning daughter of poverty and toil was thy only friend—all that stood between thee and the black, despairing river!

Lucy's suspicions were roused by this story, so like Annora's, and she told her maid to send for the woman quietly that she might question her herself. She did this, and the woman's answers left her in little doubt who was the unfortunate lady.

She did more (Heaven bless her, said my grateful heart), she went to the lodging with this woman, where she and her mistress lived, in a poor street in the Edgeware Road. It was a wretched place. She questioned the landlady, who confirmed the fact of a lady being upstairs very ill and in sore distress, who called herself Mrs. Wilson, and owed her rent. There was little doubt now in Lucy's mind.

She wrote her name on a slip of paper, and sent it up by the poor servant, who after some time came down again, and said reluctantly that her mistress would not see the lady. She brought down a twisted scrap of paper with these words:

"If you have found me out, in the wretched hole where I have crept to hide my shame and perish, stop there, and if you have any touch of



pity in you, don't try to see me. Let me die in darkness."

I could hear her—I could hear the proud, agonised, despairing spirit, speaking in these frantic words. It was useless after this for Lucy to persevere then in her attempt to see my unhappy sister. She left money—how I blessed her for this—with the landlady, for her rent, and with the servant to get her mistress medicine and necessaries, and came away, thinking what was to be done.

She felt unwilling to tell me first of what she had found, lest after all (for the evidence of her eyes was wanting) it might not be my lost sister. She told Charles.

"And that was the subject of the earnest conversation, Nell, that your coming interrupted, and which stirred up all sorts of silly fancies in your dear, jealous brain. Will you forgive me it?"

"Oh, Charles, it is I need forgiveness! I see it all now."

"Hush, darling. That then was the subject

of our talk, and we agreed not to tell you yet, till I had been with Lucy and tried to induce Nora to see me. I hoped she would, for we used to be good friends and loving cousins in the old days, poor beautiful thing. Don't sob so, Nelly! Yesterday afternoon, when you were at church, my darling, Lucy called for me, and we went together—my long mysterious absence is easily accounted for now, Nell. We drove to the Edgeware road, where we got out and left the carriage that we might not attract notice. I had a good deal of walking, for we could not find the street for some time, and then climbing up crazy staircases—it is such a miserable place—which altogether caused, I suppose, this unlucky straining of my side. I did not feel the agony till I got into the carriage again to come home. But I won my recompense, Nell, for she saw me. After a long while, and a great deal of persuasion and entreaty from the poor woman, who has never deserted her in her misery, I waiting outside the door, and Lucy below stairs, she said faintly that I might come in. And then she shrieked and hid

her face when she saw me, and cried out wildly that I mustn't look at her, and then when I called her by her name, she said 'Cousin Charlie' in her old sweet voice, and ran into my arms, and sobbed as if her heart must break. Oh, Nell, how changed she is—what a wreck, what a ruin! It is hard not to curse the memory of him who made her what she is. Worn and wasted to a shadow, God alone knows what hardships she has gone through! With a feverish light in her blue eyes, and a look of despair in them that makes you shudder, a bright, glaring red on her sunken cheeks, her lips cracked and dry, her long, bright, golden hair—Oh God! Helen, don't sob so, you wring my very soul, as her look did yesterday; I cannot go on if you do."

"Oh! Charles, Charles!" I strove mightily to be calm, to choke my sobs, to drive back the hot, rushing tears, and listen as before with my whole soul.

"I stayed with her a long time," he went on, in a lower and fainter tone, as though his strength was nearly spent. "She lay down on a miser-

able couch that was there, and had a dreadful fit of coughing that terrified me. She did not dwell much on her past suffering; she only said, with a shudder, that she had gone through two dreadful months of shame, want, and misery. She said she was very ill—in a consumption—dying fast—she hoped it was so, with a haggard look of despair on her beautiful, wasted face. But first she wept, oh! heavens, how bitterly, leaning her head on my arm, and then shrank away and begged me to forgive the pollution of her touch; poor, lost, lovely creature!” His low voice faltered with his deep emotion.

“Oh! Charlie, and you held her in your arms, my poor, dying, ruined sister. God bless you! my dearest husband!”

“I implored her to come home with me, she looked so dreadfully ill. I told her how you had searched for her, how you prayed night and day to find you; how all the past should be forgotten; how she should see no one but you and me; but in vain, she shrank and shivered at the very thought of seeing you, Nell, as if it were dreadful to her.

And any effort to combat her despairing thoughts seemed to excite her so much that I was forced to be silent, and then clasping her thin, wasted hands with a look that pierced my heart, she besought me not to tell you that I had found her. I was forced to make the promise which I well knew I could not keep, and then I left her, promising very soon to come again, words which, alas! I cannot now fulfil. I left money with the poor servant who has been so faithful to her fallen mistress, for present needs, and gave her our address. I was grieved that poor Nora would not see Lucy, who has spoken and acted with such womanly kindness and compassion for her, and to whom we owe the joy of finding her, but you could not reason with the poor, stricken thing, nor thwart her shuddering wishes, so there was no help for it. Lucy would not have wished that. I could not bear leaving her there in that place, but what could I do? My side was so painful by this time that I could scarcely walk, but I contrived to reach the carriage without exciting any suspicion that I was hurt. On our

way home (I owe the first thought of that to Lucy) we called at Dr. Twynford's. He was at dinner, but I was shewn into his library, and he came out to see me, with some amazement as you may fancy, Nell. I gave him the outlines of poor Nora's story, told him how much interested we both were in her fate—I did not say, darling, how you had always loved her as a sister—told him of her perilous state of health, and begged him to go and see her. He promised he would with his usual quick kindness, and then he read me through with one of his shrewd, keen glances that made me smile. I referred him to you for the truth of my story, if he doubted it, and then he laughed and shook my hand, and said he would do all in his power for the poor girl. And he will, as we both know; so that all that human skill can do for her will be done, dearest. And now, Nell, you know all."

"And I know, Charlie, that if it was by your errand of mercy to my poor, fallen, heart-crushed sister, that you were hurt, that you are now suffering so intensely, that your noble, tender, com-



passionate spirit went beyond your frail strength; oh, how shall I thank you for this? Take my heart's grateful blessing, my beloved husband."

"Helen, darling of my life; take mine for these sweet words," he whispered faintly, "you can trust me now?"

"Aye, with my whole soul."

He was too worn-out, too utterly weary and faint with pain to speak again, and I sat by him in silence, loving him now with a love I had not known before, his head resting on my arm, and his hand in mine, blessing God that Annora was found! Found, only to be lost again, as my heart told me; found only to die, to hide her broken heart in the quiet grave, and find rest there at last, but still to die in my arms with her weary head on my bosom, with a trembling hope of the everlasting mercy; and not in the freezing, un pitying streets, or the moaning river!

## CHAPTER IX.

DR. TWYNFORD had seen Annora when he came the next day to visit Charles. He took me aside and told me of it: spoke of her weak and dangerous state, of her great beauty, of the strange fate that must have brought her to such misery, and then with his calm, keen eyes on my face, asked me who she was. He had spoken of her with such unaffected, straightforward kindness, that I told him as well as I could, amidst my blinding tears, who and what she was to me; of how I had loved, almost worshipped her; of how she had been tempted and how fallen.

He took my hand and tried to comfort me with a true courtesy and manly kindness that moved me very much. All that his skill could do should

be done for her, but he must warn me against false hopes; she was already in the last stage of a rapid consumption, and I must not think him unfeeling if he said that death was the brightest portion that awaited her—I knew it. Better is death than life to thee, Nora, poor, bruised, sin-worn, and broken-heart!

“She must be taken away from that miserable lodging,” he continued, “and brought here; her morbid dread of seeing me must not be thought of.”—He spoke with his usual quiet decision. Would I go to-day and see her? he could spare the time, he thought, and would go with me. I said, with a strange terror at my heart, that I would go, and thanked him very gratefully, and then, when he was gone, shut myself up alone and prayed for strength for the awful ordeal.

And then Lucy came with a look of grave anxiety on her handsome face, and it would be hard to say how much I loved and blessed her then; and how I cried out my heart-thanks on her neck; and how in her usual proud, straight-

forward fashion, she made light of what she had done.

Dr. Twynford called for me at the appointed time, and we went together, he talking kindly and cheerily all the way to keep up my sinking heart. We sent away our carriage near the place, and walked on through the dark frowsy streets, whose close air, and grimy, tottering houses, and swarms of dirty children, and bedraggled women, and miserable shops, reeking with an unwholesome steam of rags, offal, and old clothes, gave me a sick, faint, feeling. At any other time it would have forced a smile from me, the sight of the great London doctor, in his faultlessly trim attire, powdered hair, shining boots, and gold headed cane, tip-toeing, with a kind of dainty horror over the broken pavement, and receiving every moment some shock to his refinement in the ragged children continually tumbling against his legs, or in the stares and audible, and not very flattering criticisms of some of the natives of this unsavoury region, to whom a civilised gentleman like himself was an almost unknown animal.

He bore all these annoyances, however, with a jaunty, good-humoured philosophy, that made me feel more grateful to him than ever.

We reached the house at last. I had never seen such a place before; its black, miserable aspect, its begrimed windows, many of them broken and patched with paper or old rags, its swarm of poverty-stricken lodgers, on whom the air or the sun of heaven seemed never to fall; that lean, sharp-featured, hopelessly worn woman that let us in, all fell on me with a weight of pity and horror.

I climbed the black, crazy stairs with a sick, swimming brain, and tottering feet. The poor servant girl whom Charles had told me of, met me on the stairs, whispered that the poor thing was worse to-day, and then went before me to show me the room, while the doctor waited for me in some miserable parlour below.

The woman slowly turned the handle of the door, (it was no use asking whether she would see me, she whispered), and I saw Annora, my ruined sister! Saw her, in the bare, wretched

room, lying on the poor couch, as when my husband had held her in his arms, a poor, wasted fever-stricken, dying thing, the golden, glistening curls that her father used to twine round his fingers with fond pride, loosely gathered from off the hot, flushed cheeks in a careless knot, here and there an escaped lock, dull and faded, trailing negligently like seaweed on a wreck, over the pillows that supported her. And, oh! the despair, the broken spirit, the wild longings for rest and death, the burning restlessness in those wandering blue eyes, those sunken cheeks, those wasted, unquiet hands, plucking nervously as she lay at the worn shawl that enveloped her.

“Helen!”

The shriek with which she uttered my name haunts me still. She sprang to her feet, awful in her wild, stricken, dying beauty; she called to me not to come near her, she did not want me; to turn my eyes away, they hurt, they killed her—holding out her arms in her frantic terror to keep me off. She looked so white, so wild, so desperate, that I almost feared her.



“Nora, Nora, my poor darling sister; don’t, oh! don’t cry so wildly. Why do you fear me?”

She cried out that my eyes tortured her; she would not bear them—oh! why wasn’t it dark? She flung herself in her desperation on the floor, and cowering, shivering, hid her face on the sofa, the faded wealth of her bright tresses sweeping over the wasted form, as though mercifully trying to hide the ravages of want and misery.

I knelt down beside the cowering form, and prayed her to look up at me, but she only moaned and shivered. Then sitting on the floor I tried to clasp and draw her closer to me, and this after a while she did not resist, and so I held her ruined beauty to my breast, and covered her forehead and her hollow, burning cheeks with my kisses. At first she moaned and writhed under the touch of my lips, but at last, perhaps from exhaustion, she lay still and passive. And so weeping very, very much I held her in my arms—this poor, crushed, shame-smitten thing—the jewel of my childhood, the bright empress of my

fancy, whom to dress and adorn was the highest of earthly privileges.

"You will come home with me, Nora, away from this wretched place; you will let me nurse you?" I pleaded.

"Oh! no, no." She shivered as if from intense cold, and groaned.

"You shall see no one, Nora; no one but Charles and me, and you shall forget the past."

"Will you blot it out?" she interrupted me, with a look of despair fearful to see.

"We will take such care of you; we have been longing and praying to find you for such a weary while. You don't know how we have been searching for you."

"Why will you drag me into the light? I want to die in darkness, forgotten," she said, with passionate despair in her voice and eyes.

"I am dying now—it will soon be all over, and I shall find—what?" her wild blue eyes stared up into mine with a look of distracted inquiry.

"I am in a consumption—I know it," her voice grew faint and broken.

“I have a frightful cough. On that dreadful night that I saw you at the Opera, I went home and broke a blood-vessel. I had caught cold in Paris, when—when—”

A terrible fit of coughing stopped her, and when it was over she lay white, exhausted, and panting for breath.

I saw that this was the time to remove her, that she was too worn and exhausted to make resistance, so I laid her on the sofa, and sent the servant, who, poor thing, was sitting on the stairs, waiting with a frightened face, for the coach we had left at the end of the street, and I busied myself in making Nora ready, and in smoothing back the tangled golden hair from the face where the hot, consumptive red had faded to a ghastly, damp whiteness. And then, with Dr. Twynford's aid—he had been waiting patiently below all this while—we led her down stairs, and took her and the poor servant girl away with us. Nora was found now—taken from pollution and misery, safe in my arms!

It was dark when we reached home, and Dr. Twynford carried Nora tenderly into the house, and Peggy, who came out to meet us, ran away at the sight of her, sobbing as if her heart must burst. It was not till she was moaning restlessly in her broken sleep that I had time to sit down and sob out my heart's sorrow over the poor, faded ruin.

But I had little time for weeping now, for my functions of nurse filled up every moment. Nora, wasting and dying before my eyes, needed constant care and watching, and could not bear my being absent from her for a moment, while Charles, whose first claim on me I felt very strongly, and whom the thought of neglecting was very painful, continued very ill.

The injury to his side was more severe than we at first thought, and it was a whole weary month of pain before he could even walk across the room. Peggy was an indefatigable and most valuable aid, but even Peggy could not be all I wanted; so that when Aunt Mary's kind, calm face came to brighten my tribulation, I felt

as if a gleam of sunshine had glanced athwart the London winter sky.

Poor Nora shrank with terror at the thought of meeting Aunt Mary, but when she saw not one reproachful shadow in those deep, eloquent eyes, heard only love and pity, and sorrow, in the quiet, tender voice, the terror died away from her failing heart and weakened brain, and she nestled to the compassionate bosom of her father's sister, as a weary child to its mother.

"Aunt, you are so like my father—so like my father," she would sometimes go on, wailing in her low, feeble, worn voice, with her head on Aunt Mary's arm. "I can fancy his eyes looking at me through yours. Pray for me, Auntie, to the merciful Jesus, that he used to talk to me of when I was a child—(oh! how dreadful to think of that now!)—that I may be forgiven, that my father's eyes may look tenderly on me in Heaven, as yours do!"

Sometimes she would lay for hours in a half-insensible state, her wasted fingers plucking restlessly at the coverlet of the bed, muttering half

deliriously of the horrors of her past life. Sometimes she had terrible dreams, and would start up and cry out wildly, shivering with dread; but as she grew weaker these frightful shadows passed away from her failing heart and brain, and left her calm and clear, and thus she wasted and faded like a poor storm-beaten flower.

She would lie still with her hand in mine and her mournful eyes resting on me, while I read to her the words of the great and merciful One, mighty to save; the word that comes with such glorious power to the bruised and broken heart, while often to that fluttering in the sunshine it has a voice of no meaning. It is the pale, dying, sin-stained lips that hurry to drink of the waters given "without money and without price:" it is the perishing hand from which all human hold is slipping that clings closest for salvation to the cross borne by the Man of Sorrows!

"I wake out of the horrible shadows of my past life," said her faint, weak voice to me one day, "and I find you near me, my true and tried sister, my good, simple, loving Nell! May



the blessing of sinful lips and a broken heart not harm you, my darling!"

She grew very gentle to us all—fading slowly into the shadows of the dark valley—to old Peggy, who remembered her in her bright days, and who never could look long at her without running out of the room to ease her full heart by a hearty sob, but she never could be persuaded to see Lucy Esham, who came daily to enquire for her, and longed to see her old companion and bright friend of past days; nor poor Steenie, whom the tidings of her being found had brought up to London; nor Uncle Edward, who wrote such letters, full of sorrow and compassion for the poor, wronged, heart-broken child, and wanted sadly to see her again before she went home, to take her once more to his breast, and give her one last kiss of peace and forgiveness. But it was not to be. Any mention of seeing those again who had loved her in her days of innocence, and still loved her in her fall, made her tremble with such moving terror that we forbore to speak of it, the more so as all excitement

in her weak, dying, state, would have been fatal.

She spoke kindly of them all, tenderly of Esther and Maude, sent them her love, prayed them to think kindly of her.

“If God is very merciful they will look forgivingly on me in Heaven, but I could not see their faces again on earth—it would kill me.”

She spoke with a low moan of remorseful sorrow of poor, wronged, noble-hearted Steenie, begged him to forgive her and pray for her, made me cut off one of her faded golden ringlets to give him when she was dead, that he might not quite forget her.

So Steenie and the poor crushed flower whom he had loved so strongly, met on this sorrowful earth never again.

“Oh, poor Emily, poor Emily, whose kind heart I broke, who idolised me;” this was almost the last distressing wail; “how shall I meet her beyond the grave?”

But this too dropped into silence, as did all other mournful complaints, and in her last days, for

now the shadows were thickening and deepening fast over her, she talked softly of Holmsley and its green lanes, and blossoming orchards, of her old friends and merry companions, of her father, of her early childhood, of the old house where she and I were born; of all the sunny old times, now shadows of dreamland. But the light was growing dim, and the running tide was very near the verge of the great ocean, and the sternest angel was not far off, his step was on the threshold. And so she died,—not, God be thanked!—in the streets or the river, but in my arms, her weary head on my bosom—broken prayers—a faint quivering shadow of a smile on the poor, faded lips!

“The light is growing dim, Nelly, very dim; I cannot see you, but the morning is breaking over the hills, isn’t it? Father in Heaven!”

And peace came down on the trembling soul, and on the beautiful face, but a mist fell upon my eyes, and a blank on my senses, and for a time I knew nothing more.

## CHAPTER X.

"THERE, go away, do, Master Charlie, and don't be looking in here, with that white scared face of thine, a frightening thy precious wife, after such a time as she's had of it. Lord help the lad! he's as white as a tallow candle." Such were the words in Peggy's very distinct whisper that broke faintly, as in a dream, upon my ear, sounding vague and at a great distance after the long blank I have spoken of.

"Thee musn't come a kissin' and a talkin' nonsense to her now," the whisper went on, "for she just can't bear it, so be off down-stairs like a good lad, and take a book and amuse thyself. The doctor have just said thee weren't to be

incitin' of her on no 'count, unless thee wants to put her in her coffin."

"But I won't excite her, Peggy, I promise you; only let me give her one kiss, and I'll go away directly. You can't tell how I am longing for a glimpse of her dear face."

"Ay, all very well; but I never know'd thee yet content with one kiss, for one brings on another, and then there's no stopping ye. Don't stand there with thy pale face, enough to melt the heart out of a coach-and-four, but go downstairs with thee, like a good boy. Just take one look at the blessed baby first, afore I take him to his mother, and if he's not a darling, just tell me. A beauty—as like his father as two peas, bless him!"

"Like me; that little, queer, red atomy? He's uncommonly hideous, Peggy."

"You ought to be 'shamed o' yourself, Master Charlie, to go calling the dear, blessed, new-born babe sich names as them, 'stead of thanking Providence for him, the dear. A nice father you'll make to the poor lamb. Hark! there's

your poor dear wife a saying somethin', frightened at your wickedness, most likely. Go away with ye, do."

And Peggy rustled indignantly across the room, baby in arms, and bending over me as I lay still in my languor, whispered to me not to mind Master Charlie's nonsense, and enforced her argument by placing by my side that tiny, mysterious bundle of flannel, with a little downy head peering above it, already so strangely precious to me.

"There, go to sleep like a dear, and never mind nobody, and I'll send Master Charlie down stairs in a twinkling. He's waiting near the door, behind the curtains, like a simpleton as he is."

"But I want him so much, Peggy, only for a minute. Poor fellow! don't send him away."

"Well, there, there don't vex thyself, and here he is. Now, Master Charlie, I'll only allow thee one minnit, so be quick about it."

"Go away, you old dragon. Nell, my own darling, thank God you are spared to me!"



It was so delicious to lay my head on his breast and letting fall a few weak tears, whisper how happy I was, thinking only then of how he loved me, and what a precious jewel was the tiny thing that nestled on my arm. I lay for a few minutes listening to his passionate words of joy and gratitude, feeling his kisses on my forehead, clinging to his love as in a happy dream.

"My own sweet, pale Nell," he said, softly shaking back my hair with his thin white hand: "I thought once I should never hear your dear voice again. I have suffered such misery, little wife."

A glance at his worn, anxious face, bore witness to the truth of his words.

"I am better now, Charlie. God has given me back to you; and what think you of your first-born?"

"I have been looking at him with astonishment and awe;" and he took another peep between the enveloping flannels. "And so this is our joint property, Nell? this queer, crimson atom of humanity. I must kiss him for your sake, and

one kiss will take in the whole of his extensive countenance. Will he ever grow any prettier?" looking at our new possession with an air of doubtful perplexity, that would have made me laugh if I had been stronger.

"Why, he is beautiful already; for shame, Charlie!"

"I beg his pardon most humbly," said he, kissing the tiny fingers, "and his sweet mother's to boot; of course he is beautiful, Nell, since you say it."

"Are you very lonely down stairs without me, Charlie?"

"Dismally so, darling: I lie on the sofa all day contemplating your empty chair, which is not a cheering object, unless when my mother comes down for a few minutes, scolds me for moping, and vanishes again; or when Lucy Esham pays me a visit, talks till I am half stupefied, and then whirls away, thinking me, doubtless, the dullest of mortal men. She is determined to be god-mother, Nell, to this diminutive gentleman."

"She is very kind, I long to see her; I hope they take care of you, Charlie, now I cannot, but Aunt Mary is safe to do that. And how is your side—painful still?"

"It gives me a twinge now and then, but that is all, dearest. You are talking too much, my own Nell; you look so tired."

"I am very tired," I said with a sigh, feeling how weak and weary I really was.

"Go to sleep, my white lily, and let me stay with you," and so with these words to lull me, with my head resting on his arm, and a pleasant drowsy sense of his presence, and of Aunt Mary softly moving about the room with a hushed tread, I floated off into delicious slumber, and my life, for the next two or three weeks—they seem months to me—is very sleepy and languid, a slow, quiet, shadowy dream, with a sense, stronger than that of my weariness, of some tiny thing, wonderfully precious, by my side, some soft, light weight on my arm, some little velvet cheek on my bosom. But I wake up at last to life and reality, and find that the spring

days are growing bright and long, and that the trees in the park are bursting into leaf, and that sunshine is on the world.

And I come down stairs, wonderfully shawled and wrapped up, and taken amazing care of, and sit on the sofa, and listen to Lucy's raptures over the baby—I never knew her so enthusiastic on any subject before—and Peggy's defiance to the world at large to produce another such a beauty; and dwell on the little placid face with a feeling unknown before, and lean my head, when I am weary, on Charles's shoulder, and think dreamily that I am very happy.

And I come to be told, now that I can hear it calmly, by my husband's lips, that Annora is laid in the old home churchyard by her father's side. I saw the grave in after days; there is a little cross of white marble placed by Uncle Edward, at its head, bearing the initials A. M., and the merciful text of the sinner I heard on the day she was found, "Verily I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." And I thought awfully

of my mother, and if she had any pitying or sorrowful memory of the bright creature who was laid there, who had been once the glory of the old house, and the rejoicing of her father's heart. And then I wondered dreamily if I should ever show my child to her who gave me birth.

I had a long talk with Uncle Edward about this time. He had come up to London to give me a fatherly hug, after all I had gone through, as he said, and to inspect his grandson. Dear Uncle Edward! the remembrance of his hearty exultation at the unexpected size and sturdiness of "Charlie's boy," his intense gratification at his powerful lungs and fine cheeks, made me laugh for many a day after. And yet our talk was a sad one, being chiefly of Steenie, whom they were all anxious and unhappy about.

"He's craving to travel," Uncle Edward said, "and wants to be off to Canada, to an old friend of mine, who, I know, would receive him as a son, but I'm loth to let the lad go off to a foreign land, across the sea, ill as he is looking, where we might never set eyes on him again—

and it would nearly break my poor Mary's heart. She's had heavy sorrow for poor Nora, and then this coming on the top of that would be sore to bear. I want you to talk to him, Nell, he was always very fond of you, and who knows but you might cheer him up, and do some good, my lassie. You'll try, won't you, little woman, for his mother's sake?"

Very readily I promised it, but with a sorrowful misgiving that all I could urge would be profitless as the sighing of the wind.

Uncle Edward and Aunt Mary had returned home, when one dull wet evening, Charles after a vast amount of persuasion, went to dine with Esther, who had come back to Russell Square with her olive-branches, and I was left alone, to amuse myself with the small thing lying on my lap, and to talk as much mother's nonsense to it as I pleased, with a comfortable conviction that none heard me, till Peggy came to carry him to bed, and to scold me for tiring myself to death with my new plaything, and I was left to lean back on the sofa and gaze into the fire, con-



scious ere long of a vague wish for Charles to come home.

I had not observed the weather before, but now I know that the wind is rising, and that it shrieks and moans in the chimneys of the house, and rattles the windows like a legion of spirits, and the rain comes in gusts, and sweeps the road without with sudden lashes.

What a night!

I go to look out, and see a black sky whose gloom oppresses me, and the street lamps, quivering and blown about restlessly by the blast, and the rain striking the deserted road like a whip. And I go back to my seat by the fire, and try to think of pleasant things; but all sorts of wild and drear foreshadowings start up inexplicably and thrust the bright fancies away, and ere long I find myself listening to the moaning whistling wind again with a shudder.

What weather for Charles to be out in! I wish he had not gone—why did I let him? I suppose I am not quite strong yet, or why do I start every five minutes with a fancy of a whisper at

my ear, a voice calling me, a stealthy tread on the stairs? That is a step without, or is my brain disordered? That is a human hand that slowly opens the door before my dazzled and throbbing eyes.

“Helen.”

Did the mind say that word? or are the old nursery tales true, and do the spirits of the dead come back to freeze the blood of the living? And is this the ghost of Frank Langley, who sleeps at Waterloo, whose wife I should have been, come back over sea and land to haunt me with accusing eyes? No blood-stained spectre from that field of graves—pale, worn, ghastly looking—but with no blood upon him, no death wound on his breast—Frank standing before me, strange, awful thing! like a living man, speaking to me with a living voice—the body that never was found. I don't know what it is, nor why it comes to me, but my senses reel and swim, and a thick darkness comes before my eyes. But it will not stay for ever, it clears away at last, and I come back, slowly

and dimly, to a consciousness of the dreadful thing, and the spirit, if spirit he be, is holding me in his arms, calling on me with wild and passionate words of entreaty, covering my face with kisses from warm, living lips.

I tore myself from his arms as strength came faintly back to me—I stood up and faced him, white and quivering with dread—I asked him who he was and why he came to haunt me.

“I am no ghost,” his voice, unheard for so long, associated with death and the grave, had an unspeakably awful sound in my ears, as he stood before me, worn and hollow cheeked, speaking with a passionate energy fearful to hear. “I am the living man, Frank Langley, to whom you pledged your faith, whose wife you swore to be, who left his native land with your kisses fresh on his lips, your vows sounding in his ears, who went out to face the enemy with a prayer on his lips for you, who amidst blood, and death, and carnage, thought only of you, the love of his soul, the last word on whose lips when he

sunk wounded almost to death among a heap of corpses was your name. Helen, where is my bride?"

His voice of hollow despairing wretchedness was dreadful to hear, it was the iron entering into my soul.

"I am married."

My white lips could scarcely form the words, and my voice as I uttered them sounded strange to my own ears. Husband and child were forgotten just then.

"I know it," his whole frame quivering with his passionate excitement. "I know you are perjured and forsworn, that your tender words your sweet promises, are empty as this whistling wind—miserable mockeries. I come like a ghost from the grave to upbraid you with your broken vows, to curse you for your faithlessness. And yet, I cannot, for your pale, sweet face—oh! woman, that I loved better than my own life—wakes up within me the old despised love, that I have been fiercely trying to tear up and trample down for long miserable months. Oh!

Nell, Nell, is this the end of all—wounds, misery, long and hopeless suffering!"

He gave a convulsive stamp of his foot, as if trying to tread down some strong agony, and groaned. I sat down, for I felt too weak to stand, and a dull intolerable weight of anguish, bent my head on my hands. And he was there before me, agonising me with living eyes; and the wind was shrieking, and the rain beating round us.

"We thought you were dead, all believed it, the colonel of your regiment wrote that though your body had never been found, there was no hope of your having escaped."

I had no consciousness of uttering these words, but it was my voice that spoke them.

"They lied!" his eyes shone with a despairing fire. "I was horribly wounded, left for dead, missed by parties of my own men sent out to search for me, found the night after the battle by some poor peasants, who pitying my miserable state—I was almost at the last gasp then—carried me home with them, and strove to bring

me back to life. They succeeded—would to Heaven they had left me to perish! My wounds were very dangerous; I was frightfully ill for five or six months, without the power of communicating with any one, cut off from my regiment, where I was supposed dead, my name struck off the army list, my commission given to another. As soon as my trembling fingers could hold a pen, I wrote to you from Brussels.”

“I never got the letter.”

“There was some evil accursed fate against us,” he cried wildly, stamping his foot. “I was too ill, to go out myself, and I trusted the letter to a servant I had just hired, to post; he may have lost it, curses on him! it is madness to think of. I was too weak to travel yet; I longed, waited hopelessly for your answer—it never came. I met a man at Brussels whom I had formerly known, his regiment was quartered at Willesten; he had come from thence, travelling on leave. He told me that Charles Brotherton had been very ill—dying, it was thought,



—but was now recovering, and that you were engaged to him; that every one supposed you were averse to the marriage, but that he was desperately in love with you, and that his family were urging it on. I could have throttled him for his tidings. I laughed with fierce indignation at the story as a miserable fabrication of country gossips, but he solemnly assured me of its truth. He had heard it from Steenie, Charles's brother, my old friend and comrade. Pity me, Helen, for the fiery pangs of wrath, hatred, and indignation that swooped down like vultures upon my darkened soul! Every better feeling, every touch of grace that your sweet voice and gentle ways had fostered within my rough nature, died out utterly, and left my heart a black, howling wilderness. I wrote you a mad letter, upbraiding you with your treachery, and then when written, tore it up and flung into the fire, as I would your memory. I meant as soon as I could travel to come to England to seek you out, and shoot him before your eyes, though the clutches of the law

should be at my throat the instant after. Oh, God! how white she is: how she shudders! Oh, Helen! forgive me, savage, demon that I am!"

He knelt beside me, as I lay back on the sofa, sick and faint, and wildly prayed my forgiveness, but I shrank from him with a dread I could not stifle—a feeling of painful weakness and helplessness fell on me.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie, come and save me!"

"You are not afraid of me, Helen?" he said in a low tone of such intense misery that it pierced me to the heart.

"I want my husband—you frighten me," I said, turning from him in my weakness and hiding my face like a terrified child.

"Oh, Nell! have you not one word of pity for the misery I have endured, for my horrible sufferings of mind and body; for the misery that has been scorching my heart like a burning coal for the last wretched year!"

There was an eloquence that made me shiver in his imploring voice—his wild-glowing dark eyes, his gaunt weary figure, his sharp features

wasted with illness, and inward misery—and I thought with a shudder of pity and terror of the brave, handsome, gallant young soldier from whom I parted in our first glow of love and hope.

“By the time I was well enough to take the journey to England, a stray newspaper fell into my hand, in which I saw your marriage. You had not waited one year, Helen! In ten months after my supposed death, you forgot me, and married that pale, sickly boy, whom you used to swear you looked upon as a brother, and talk of with pity. Do you marvel that all good thoughts forsook me, that in my wild, rough nature tamed before by your sweetness, I became a savage; that I cursed you and him. I abandoned my wild scheme of revenge, not from any relenting towards you, but from a loathing to return to England. For the last year I have wandered about France and Germany, a wreck in mind and body as you now see me. I came back like a ghost from the grave, and find myself forgotten—so altered, even in looks, that though I passed Steenie Brotherton in the streets to-night, he did

not recognise me. I traced him to this house, watched till I saw him leave it, and found by enquiry that you lived here. Have you no pity, no word of kindness for me—only shrinking and dread? I came back to my own land—a blighted, forgotten wretch, unrecognised even by old friends—an outcast. O! woman! if you would not have my blood on your soul, speak to me!”

I rose up, exhausted as I was, white, horror-struck; I tried to speak calmly. I took his hand in mine.

“Frank, Frank, listen to me! What would you have me do? I am married, I love my husband and my child, I cannot rekindle the ashes of that old love—to speak of it is a dreadful sin. Oh, poor Frank! I pity you from my soul; pity me also! Ours has been a strange fate; it is no human hand that has divided us. Won’t you leave me now, and try to think gently and pityingly of me, and not hardly of poor Charlie, and trust in God, Frank, to heal the wound in your heart, and be merciful to us both. I will pray for you, poor fellow, and oh learn—strive

to pray for yourself. And—but I am very weak and tired, Frank, it is not more than six weeks since my child was born.”

He supported me with his arm, and I found myself, with a strange, painful thrill, for one short moment, leaning on his breast.

“Oh, Helen! angel! even now your sweet voice has the same old magic for me. God forgive me for causing you one pang of grief or terror! Oh, Nell, you have wrecked and ruined me, yet give me one sorrowful thought, when you sit by your husband’s side, and your head is on his breast, and I will bless you, and try to forgive him. What might have been is a ghastly mockery now—but you look so faint and weary, my poor Helen! I will leave you, go into the beating rain and rushing wind, a likeness of the life before me. Think of me sometimes at your bright fire-side, wandering in the storms and darkness.”

How the wind shrieked as he spoke, almost drowning his words, and then died away in a long moaning gust. It drowned also a ring at

the door, but not the slow, languid tread mounting the stairs, that told of my husband's coming. An unutterable sense of relief was my first impulse; but the blaze of fiery and passionate resentment that lit up my companion's haggard face and wild eyes, struck a dreadful terror into me; I turned sick and cold with a nameless dread. I ran to Charles, and clung round him, with a vague thought of shielding him from the wrathful despairing fire of those eyes. I saw his cheek turn white, and his slight frame shiver with strange excitement.

"Who—what is this, Helen? man or spirit—speak!"

I tried to answer, but my voice failed utterly; I could only gasp with quivering lips, and shudder helplessly in his arms.

"What has brought him back from his grave to torture us? Good God, Langley! are you in life?"

"I am: give me back the woman you robbed me of—the love that was mine, the faith that was pledged to me, my betrothed wife! Give



me my Helen—the pure, tender creature that I worshipped, whom you stole from me, you pale slight lad, that I could crush with a blow.” The intense passion of his low, stifled, hollow voice was fearful to hear.

“She is mine: if I have wronged you, Langley, it was innocently—unknowingly; we all believed you dead. Even now I listen to you as in a horrible dream, you stand before me like a shadow from the world of spirits. Helen, why do you shudder and cling to me with such terror? I have no fear of him.”

“I know you have not, lad; and though once I could have shot you without mercy, and would have done it had you come in my way in the madness of my passion, I will not hurt you now, for the sake of that trembling girl that hangs on your neck; I will not even curse you. But I cannot see her in your arms, and have no power to tear her from them. Nell, lost to me for ever! farewell! Think of me as a ghost—a spirit, come back from the grave to haunt you for one hour, and never to be seen more.”

He was gone—he rushed out of the house into the night, the rain, and the darkness. I was left alone with Charles, lying in his arms, forgetting how little able he was to support me, conscious only of an overwhelming sense of weakness and horror—a longing for utter forgetfulness, feeling as though all powers of life were deserting me, half hoping that it was so.

My husband sat down on the sofa, and drew me close to him, holding me on his breast, kissing my white cheeks and closed eyes with passionate affection and sorrow.

“Nell, my life, my darling, this horrible scene has nearly killed you! Why does he live? why has that phantom come back to break our rest? Speak to me, Helen.”

“I am so frightened, so miserably weak; but oh! don’t look so wretched; I love you, Charlie, and—but there is a mist over everything, and I am falling; why don’t you hold me?”

His terrified cry, some hurried footsteps running into the room, sounded faint in my ears, and another long blank followed.

## CHAPTER XI.

“THE mysteries of this life is dreadful,” said Peggy, musing over the baby as she sea-sawed him to and fro, “and these here mysteries would puzzle the Pope of Rome, let alone a poor, silly old woman like me; and as for seeing of ghosts, never let no man preach again ’em never no more to my face, for as I hope to be saved, I see Mr. Frank’s last night, as was killed in battle. He passed me like a blast of wind down the stairs, and a’most knocked the candle out of my hands as I were a coming up, and he looked so white and wild, for all the world like a madman. I fell right back against the wall for fright, my teeth chattered awful, and the ghost were out o’ the front door like a flame of fire, and Mrs. Jiffs

running up to know who had let such a wind in, and then I heard Master Charlie cry out to me to come to my missus, and up I went and finds the dear lamb as white as a sheet, and looking for all the world as if she was dead, though I'd left her quite well, and smiling as sweet as an angel, bless her, when I put the blessed babe to bed. And, Lord help us Miss Lucy! but if sperrits is allowed to walk the earth in this fashion, 'twill be an awful thing for all of us."

"Hush, Peggy, my good soul, she may hear you. I wish you'd go down stairs, and try to make your master eat some breakfast, he has touched nothing to day, and he looks so terribly ill and worn out. Put my little godson into his cradle, he seems asleep. And, Peggy, take my advice, and never talk of what you see, nor of who it was to anybody, remember that. I know that it would grieve and annoy your mistress."

"There's no fear, bless you; I wouldn't vex the sweet soul of her to be made a queen of. And so I'll just step down and look after Master Charlie, poor dear lad."

When she was gone Lucy came near the bed, where I lay in my weakness and weariness, and bending over me and looking into my face with her dark, searching eyes, softly put back my hair.

"Are you better, Nell? How you have frightened us, little woman."

I said I was, and then I tried weakly to recall the terrors of last night's vision, but my brain was confused, and it seemed all a misty dream.

"Was it all true, Lucy?" I asked entreatingly, with a sort of instinctive feeling that she must know.

"I'm afraid it was, Helen."

She sat down beside me, and took my hand in hers, with a comforting pressure. The words sounded like a knell; I hid my face.

"It is a hard doom, poor child, both for him and you, that he so long mourned as dead, whose place is given to another, should come back, a living spectre, to terrify you. He can only be a shadow to you now, Nell; you have no place in your heart for him. I pity him; I pity you, your

destiny has been a strange and mysterious one, but there is no help for it. No man may say, 'What doest thou?' to the hand that has divided your lives. You have strength to rise superior to this horror, and you must do it." I felt the power of her dark eyes as they rested on my face, of her clear calm voice. "You think me hard and cold perhaps, Nell, but I think I am your true friend. You have, I believe, a strong brave spirit; now is the time of its trial, let it not sink and perish in the fire, a poor, weak, cowardly thing. You must forget the vision of last night—nay, don't shrink and shudder—I say you must forget it. Think of your child, the little life resting on your bosom; of your husband, standing in so much need of your aid, of your affection, 'loving you as woman can seldom hope to be loved.' He looks so ill, Helen, so fearfully unhappy! I came here this morning to see you, knowing nothing of all this, when Peggy stopped me on the stairs with some terrified nonsense about a ghost she had seen last night, and ended her story by telling me you were very ill, and her



master was almost distracted. I went into the drawing-room, and saw your husband sitting with his arms on the table, and his head on them. He started upon hearing my step, and he looked so ghastly and haggard, so worn-out for want of rest, so utterly wretched, that though not easily frightened, I stared at him in terror. He began by saying confusedly that you were ill, that you had been alarmed, and ended by telling me all the story in incoherent words. Then he threw himself restlessly on the sofa, and hiding his face in his hands, rambled on wildly about the wrong he had done you, poor fellow; of his selfishness, and that if you were not married to him you might be happy now. He was beyond the reach of my comfort, Helen, and so I left him."

Her eyes had never left my face as she said this. I sat up in bed, though my head at first swam with weakness, tremblingly resolving, inwardly praying to be strong.

"What are you doing?" Lucy asked.

"I will go down stairs to Charlie. I want to see him."

"You are too weak, poor child," she said with much emotion in her voice. "You must not think of it. Lie still, and I will send him to you."

"No, no; indeed I feel strong enough, let me go, I would rather."

I would listen to no dissuasions, for I felt strong then after once rising; the thought of my poor Charlie ill, wretched, and alone down stairs, calmed my throbbing head, and nerved my unsteady limbs. Lucy helped me partially to dress, put on my dressing gown, and smoothed my hair as tenderly as though I were a sick child, then led me down stairs, told Peggy, whom we met on the way, and who was about to raise an outcry of amazement, to hold her tongue and go up to the baby, and then left me with a kiss at the drawing-room door.

Perhaps nothing could have been more powerful to drive away the heavy memory of last night's horror than one glance at my husband,

as he sat still in the desponding posture Lucy had spoken of, his bowed head resting on his folded arms as though the very light was painful to him.

“Charlie.”

He started and raised his head, the painful wretchedness, the whiteness of the worn spiritual face, smote me to the soul.

“Why did you get up? they told me you were very ill,” he said, speaking with the nervous irritation of a sick heart.

“Lucy Esham gave me such a melancholy account of your looks, Charlie, that I came down to see after you,” I said, trying to force a smile: “have you no kinder greeting for me than this?”

He shrank away from me, rose from his chair, and walked towards the fire; then, as if he had not strength to stand, threw himself on the sofa, and again rested his forehead on his hands with a faint groan.

“Charles, speak to me, or you will break my heart,” I pleaded, following him in terror, and

bending over him as he sat. "Only look up and say something—one word. Why are you so unkind."

He raised his head and leant back on the sofa, as if exhausted.

"You look so faint and worn, you are ill, Charlie! What shall I do for you?"

"Nothing; you hurt me," he said, wincing painfully, as I passed my hand over his forehead.

"You used not to shrink from the touch of my hand, dearest; you used to say it soothed you. Why are you angry with me?"

"I am not angry, but—my head aches so fearfully, and last night was one of sleepless horror. Give me some water, Helen."

He looked half fainting as these words dropped slowly and falteringly from his lips. I flew in terror for some wine, forced him to drink it, and saw him revive a little.

"I wish I could do something for you, dearest."

"Then blot out the remembrance of last night's spectre," he broke out passionately; "the thought

that you married me from compassion, that your love was never mine, and never will be, that, though bound to me by chains you cannot break, and which are painfully, intolerably galling to you; your heart is his who started up as it were from the grave last night to claim you!"

He had risen and stood before me, bodily pain and mental wretchedness striving for the mastery in his pale, wasted features.

In my repentant sorrow, I threw my arms round him, I entreated him with tears to listen to me.

"Oh, Nell, forgive the wrong I did you; pardon the life of weariness and disappointment to which I have doomed your young heart. I read in your face last night, my poor darling, what Frank Langley still was to you."

"Oh no, no, Charlie, my dearest husband, why do you torture me by speaking thus? Have I not been a true and loving wife; have we not been very happy; what have you to reproach me with?"

“Nothing, nothing, darling! I have been very happy, Nell—”

“And I too have, Charlie, and we shall still be happy, by God’s mercy—happy in our own love, in our little darling whom He has given us.” I laid my head on his breast, and he did not shrink from me. “Take me to your heart, husband, and keep me there. I have not been false to you. I have not wronged you by one disloyal thought. Trust me now.”

“My Nell, my pure lily! And the past is not a miserable dream—you do love me—you will not now take away the affection that is needful to my life—you will not quench my heart’s light, and leave me in darkness; you are still my dark-eyed pure flower, my true wife?

“Yes, Charlie; lie down now—you look so worn-out, and I will stay with you.”

“But you were so ill yourself all night, darling—that horrible night!”

“Forget it, Charlie, I feel better now, and it will not hurt me to sit by you. I am sure your



head is aching terribly, poor fellow; all this excitement must injure you. Try to sleep, dearest."

He lay down with a sigh of pain and weariness, and I sat beside him, as ever his hand in mine. And I knew he trusted me, and I hope that no ungrateful sorrow was stirring at my heart, that no shadow of last night's dread was black between us! And Frank and I never met again, and it was better so, since to look into each other's faces could only bring pangs of intolerable pain and agonising memory. It was a long time before I could think of him and his strange, sad destiny, without a shiver of restless agony and piercing regret, but the time did come at last, and it was no treachery to my husband if I prayed nightly for poor Frank, the old love and glory of my girl's heart, and that he might find light and peace amid the storms and darkness where, in my thought, he is always wandering.

Lucy kept the secret faithfully, and no one of our family save my husband and myself, knew that Frank did not fall at Waterloo. Even

Peggy's story of her seeing the ghost of Miss Helen's old love faded away at last. Many years after I heard, from some accidental source, of his death in America. Poor, poor, Frank! it is no sin now to think sorrowfully of your wrongs. When we meet beyond the grave may your spirit look forgivingly upon mine.

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I was ill and weak for some time after this, for my brain had received a shock it did not easily (perhaps it never did) recover. And Charles, to the utmost limit of his frail strength, poor fellow, was the tenderest of nurses, and his gentle touch, and low sweet voice, and thoughtful affection, became infinitely precious to me, and his quiet lame tread, the most gladdening of earth's music, dearer even than my baby's pretty laughter or the patting of his tiny velvety hands on my weary cheek

But I had another nurse, more capable, though not more willing and tender, and this was Mary Tremordyn. Charles and I had long been wishing to see her fair face—this brightest and best

beloved of our three sisters; and when I grew ill, he wrote to ask her to come and nurse me. So sweet Mary left her little delicate boy to the care and petting of her brother, and came up to London to brighten and cheer us both with her beauty and goodness.

Lucy Esham, whose yearly campaign had now begun, and whose days fled away in an endless whirl, perfectly bewildering to think of, found time, nevertheless, to run in for a few minutes almost every day, stir us up with her quick, clever talk, make us laugh, and then—her object achieved—depart again. She conceived a wonderful liking and admiration for Mary, alleging that the Brotherton family were really an astonishing race, being, all of them, perfection in their several ways.

Mr. Tremordyn brought Mary up to London, and even his stern, handsome face was really a welcome sight as that of an old friend I had not seen for a long time. I thought—and so did my husband—that there was a deeper shadow than ever in Mary's dark eyes, and a restlessness in

her usual graceful, tranquil manner, that I could not understand; but it was not to vex me long.

One night Mr. Tremordyn came in (he was not staying with us, but with an old college friend) as his wife and I were sitting together, Mary talking, with a dreamy sadness that struck me forcibly, over her girlish days, and what happy ones they were, when her husband walked in, and nodding to me in his usual fashion, threw himself into a chair by the fire, and fell into a fit of musing.

I saw that she gave him a troubled, restless look of inquiry. He did not observe it at first, but after a few minutes thought, he raised his head, and met her eyes, and returned their glance by a slight nod.

"It is settled," said he.

Mary's eyes fell, a shade of trouble and perplexity that vexed and fretted me came over her face.

"May I tell Helen?" she said at last tremulously.

"Certainly, if you will, everybody must

know it soon," was his cold answer, and rising walked to the window and stood looking out and tapping with his fingers on the pane as though quite unconcerned in what was going forward.

"How shall I begin?" faltered Mary, with a strange reluctance and with a tremor in her voice. "Nell, dear, we shall have to say good bye soon."

"Pshaw!" interrupted her husband, "there is no need of so sentimental a mode of commencement, Mary. I will take the trouble off your hands. Helen," said he, turning from the window and facing me, his clear-cut, statue-like face, firm mouth, and proud, stern forehead, distinctly defined in the bright evening light, "I am going to leave England, to give up Holmsley—this is the mighty mystery. I am going out as a missionary to one of the Pacific Islands."

"A missionary!" I sat stupified.

"Is it so hard of belief?" he said quietly.

"And Mary?"

"Mary goes with me."

I turned in my bewilderment and distress for a refutation of his words, but her eyes were turned another way.

"Is this true, Mary?" I appealed entreatingly.

"Yes, Nell."

Such a depth of sorrow there was in the quiet voice.

"And you will leave England—leave us all?"

The words sounded so strange as I spoke them that I could scarcely believe I was not in a dream.

"Yes, leave dear old England, and dear Holmsley, my childhood's home, and the beloved faces, and the green lanes and meadows, and my mother—"

She ended with a passionate burst of tears.

"Mary, I thought you wiser," said Mr. Tremordyn in a tone of surprised contempt.

My heart revolted from him. I thought him cruel and hard; the sight of her tears and the thought of losing her filled me with bewildered sorrow. I turned again to him, but there was



no shadow of a jest on his calm, cold, handsome features.

“ I can scarcely believe even now,” I said; “ I don’t understand it—surely this is a sudden resolution?”

“ No, it is one I have long dwelt on. I believe I have strength and energy for the labours of a missionary—it is a post I have long coveted, and now as an opportunity is offered me of attaining my wish, I am glad to embrace it. Why is it so incredible?”

“ But to take Mary away from us all—from her mother, home, friends, country.”

“ I use no compulsion,” said he with his quiet smile, “ it is her free choice to go with me. And there is one whom we profess to call our Master who has said, ‘ he that loveth mother or father more than me, is not worthy of me.’ ”

“ But can you not serve Him in England—is no work of His to be done at home? Are there not dark places in our native land where His light has never shined?”

“ True, we may serve Him quietly at home,

in a sober fashion, never going out of our way, scattering the seed in the beaten road, but never caring to climb the rocks and searching the wilderness that lies on either side of our track, to gather in straying souls. There are dangers to be overcome in His service—difficulties to be struggled with—artful foes to watch against. There are mountains to climb and strange rivers to ford, and perils that make the soul quiver in the dark places of the earth, where the banner of the cross has never been raised. Those are my destination.”

He spoke with a calm, fixed determination that awed me. I looked at his tall, erect, immoveable figure, as he stood with his arms folded, the glow of the sunset falling on his marble features, compressed lips, and calm, dark unflinching eyes, through which shone the high hopes of his unbending soul—the lofty ambition that I could not comprehend, but only vainly marvel at, and I felt indeed that he was in earnest, and all hope of bending him from his purpose, was as idle as the empty air.

“And Ned?—Will you take him with you?”

“Oh, yes,” she answered with nervous quickness, “I could not leave him behind—dear little white delicate blossom!” and her mother’s soul shone out through her dark eyes still glistening with tears.

“Does Charles know of this?” I asked, still musing in my sorrowful perplexity, glancing restlessly at Mr. Tremordyn’s inflexible face.

“No; I must trust you to tell him,” Mary answered, her voice trembling a little. “I don’t think I have courage to; dear Charlie, you must comfort him, Nell.”

“You were always the dearest of his sisters, and your father and mother; oh! Mary how shall we let you go.”

The thought was so unspeakably dreary, it oppressed me with such a weary, sorrowful blank, that my tears started and fell fast.

“Helen, Helen! you are very wrong, you are unkind,” pleaded Mary: “I thought you would have strengthened me.”

“There are rougher obstacles in the road than

Helen's tears," said Mr. Tremordyn, in his quiet, unruffled voice, and with the old smile curling his lip: "have you courage, Mary? This is a foretaste of floods of tears we shall have to swim across, of pleadings and remonstrances, and a whirlwind of opposition from all quarters. Does not your resolution falter?"

"And all old, dear, clinging memories," whispered his wife, speaking half to herself. "No, George; it will be hard work, harder and sorer even than I dreamt, but I am ready."

She rose and moved to his side as he stood before us, with his deep, searching eyes upon her face, and laid her dark locks upon his shoulder.

He must take her to his heart, I thought indignantly; but no, he only passed his arm round her as she leant on him, and put his lips to her white forehead, the utmost amount of endearment she ever drew from him, I imagine.

Perhaps some such thought was stirring sorrowfully at her heart.

"I wish I thought you loved me more, George,"

she pleaded, in her sweet, thrilling tones: "it would be easier then."

"Child, I love you as well as I ought, as well as woman need wish to be loved; not with a blind idolatry, setting you up above my Maker, falling down and worshipping you, but as a friend, a comforter, a weaker fellow soldier in the great battle of Life; as well as mortal man, knowing that his hereafter will be eternal, ought to love any frail, human thing like himself."

The words, strong and cold as they were, sounded the colder for the voice in which they were spoken.

"I hear Charlie coming," Mary said, with nervous quickness. She shook the shadows from her sweet, calm face, and was her bright, graceful self for the rest of the evening, more tender even than usual, I thought, to Charles, and we did not speak again of the subject, to think of which made my heart tremble, for the few remaining days we spent in London.

Ere he went, Mr. Tremordyn told me that everything was settled, and that he had agreed

to sail in six weeks. I saw that to bend him from his purpose would be as hopeless as trying by force of words to uproot a marble pillar, and I spoke no more. I knew that his calm life and its round of quiet duty, had long weighed heavily upon him, that his energetic, ambitious spirit, yearned for a wider sphere, a rougher and more hazardous field of action, that in the high hopes of his strong, unflinching heart he longed to bear the cross through hosts of his Master's enemies, till, in that Master's strength, he stood conqueror over them all.

I wondered at, I almost feared him, but in spite of the sorrow it brought me, I admired his lofty nature, his high and pure ambition, his unshrinking courage. And he had need of a goodly portion of his resolution now, and Mary in the inward struggle and the outward grief that paled her cheek, and made her tall, slender form droop, had need of all the strength he could give her, and of that which her own heart-prayers won for her. There was a cloud now over the summer beauty of her old home that she was so soon to leave, perhaps for ever, and her trial was a heavy



and sore one; her father's indignation, her mother's voiceless and deep sorrow; the grief, remonstrances, and hot opposition of all whom she loved.

Perhaps poor Peggy's sobs and sore lamentations at her dear lass going out to live among the black heathen, were not among the least of poor Mary's trials, loving as she did the faithful old nurse, leal and true, whose trusty affection had known no change since she lay a tiny child in her arms.

It was so hard, so impossible, to picture home without her—its brightest jewel—that we all shrank wearily from the trial, turned our eyes shrinkingly from the dull blank that must follow her going.

Poor Uncle Edward, in his impetuous sorrow and indignation at the loss of his sweet lassie, the pride and darling of his heart, never grew to think calmly of it at all. He and Mr. Tremordyn had their first quarrel at this time, the father vehement'y upbraiding him with keen grief and anger for taking his child from home and country to live with savages. Poor Uncle

Edward! he threatened in the excess of his wrath and sorrow to keep her by force, and it was only Mary, clasping him round the neck, and pleading earnestly and tearfully that he would let her share her husband's lot, that made him cry like a child, and say she must have her will.

But time speeds on as ever, and the cries and wailings of human hearts check not a motion of his wings, and when the hour came God was good to us, and the sorrow of our parting was softened by faith and hope. And Mary went away in her beauty and her earnestness, in her strong love and trust, with her husband and her little fair, delicate boy, the pet and darling of us all, whose last pretty, tearful kisses and childish good-bye were woeful things to bear, and we saw her no more.

It was long ere we could believe she was really gone, our household star, that the light of her smile, and the charm of her presence had faded from our home—long ere we could shake off the dreary, unsettled blank that hung over our daily life—long ere Maude and I had cured ourselves

of a trick of wandering towards the empty, desolate parsonage—in itself a most melancholy place, ghostly with memories of her we had lost, half expecting to meet her on the way. But Mary we met no more.

From time to time—and what times they were of joy and sorrow—we received bright, hopeful letters from her, her brave, tender, truthful spirit shining in every line, telling of the beauty of her new home, and how she began to like her fresh adventurous life, and of all their joys and crosses and difficulties—touching very lightly on these—and of Ned's improved health and looks, and of how tender George was to her—perhaps he had learned to value her in that far southern isle—and ending always with a bright anticipation of a return home in future years.

And though the dreary void that she left behind her was never quite filled, and though her place in her mother's heart is still kept sacred, we can think calmly and cheerfully of her now, for we know that she and her husband are treading in the footsteps of their Divine Master, and that all is well.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE golden summer glided quietly on after Mary had left us, trying my best to cheer and amuse my husband, who keenly felt the loss of his beautiful and beloved sister.

My Harry was the rosiest, plumpest, and noisiest of little rogues, as much given as ever to shaking his fists at the world in general, which indications of a warlike spirit and strong energies Uncle Edward viewed with unbounded delight, prophesying from them all sorts of brilliant achievements and successes in after life. I really believe he has faith in the thought that his grand-son would ultimately become a second Arthur Wellesley, and if noise was any presage of future greatness, we might rest content in the belief that he would be a very great man indeed.

We were a quiet house at this time, for Esther had gone to the sea-side, and Steenie was away; he was scarcely ever at home now. His scheme of going to Canada was not given up, perhaps he had deferred his departure to satisfy his mother's entreaties, to whom the thought of another parting was very terrible, but it was still hanging over our heads, as Maude said, like a horrible ghost.

Jessie was with us now almost every day, paler quieter than ever, working very hard at her needle all day, in some conscientious efforts, poor child, to drive away weary, fruitless thoughts, and cravings, and always skilfully and bravely avoiding all talk of Steenie, and keeping resolutely silent whenever his name was mentioned by any one, unless forced to speak, only giving notice by a little restless sigh of the heart throb within. Poor, little, fond, faithful, long-tried Jessie! Foremost in my remembrances of this time is her pale, weary, young face; her down-cast, blue eyes, her drooping brown hair, her busy restless hands, striving by their rapid

motion and ceaseless industry to stifle the slow mouldering grief of thought within.

We were all grouped around the open window one golden August <sup>1st</sup> morning, Charles reading on the sofa, Maude nursing her nephew, Jessie sewing, I musing, as usual, over Steenie, when Dr. Stirling, red-faced, wiry-haired, cynical, and warm-hearted as of yore, entered to us in an alarming state of heat to unfold a piece of amazing, breath-arresting news, eliciting a simultaneous burst of incredulity.

“Miss Grimston is married! Literally and positively led to the altar, lawfully consigned to the bands of matrimony, and come to Haverford on her wedding trip; and after that,” said Dr. Stirling, sitting down to wipe his forehead, and draw a long breath, “I think I may say that there are literally no bounds whatever either to the designing artfulness of woman, nor to the simplicity of man; and furthermore, that I shall never be astonished again as long as I live.”

Our first transports of amazement subsided a little, the absurdity of the thing broke upon us



and mirth followed quick on the heels of stupefaction.

“Married,” said Dr. Stirling, drawing another long breath, and hitting himself on the chest by way of revival; “led to the hymenial altar, eh! that sphynx, that female monster. What could have been the conscience of the clergyman who performed the ceremony?”

We all demanded an explanation—how, when, and where the marvel had taken place.

“All I know is,” said the doctor, looking solemnly appalled at the bare recollection, and rubbing his head very hard with both hands to re-collect his faculties, “that this very morning, I met the—the feminine griffin, aforesaid, in the High Street of Haverford, arrayed contrary to her usual custom, which was that of wearing sad coloured garments, best suited to her physiognomy and figure, in a parti-coloured silk gown of light and scant drapery—an old fashion that—and her countenance surmounted by a straw bonnet, of tower-like form and dimension, adorned with pink vanities—known by the name of ribbons—

likewise bedecked with a white shawl, and bearing the invariable cotton umbrella, that used of yore to strike terror into the hearts of her fellow creatures. O! vanity of woman! that even a creature like the aforesaid dragon must deck herself in bridal gear!"

"Well, well, doctor, go on we entreat you."

"This apparition," resumed the doctor, with a face of lugubrious alarm infinitely amusing, "led captive an unhappy creature bearing the outward semblance of a man, and whose state of mind, if one may judge from appearances, was not enviable. She pounced upon me instantly; I was so paralysed by the vision before me that I had not presence of mind to make my escape; and presented her victim, as her husband, Mr. Samuel Fotherby—the poor wretch's name ought to be remembered and held up as a warning to his fellow-men,—adding with an air of grim triumph that made her look appallingly hideous, that they were just married, and out on their wedding trip—it must be a joyful one!—staying with an old friend of hers at Haverford, and

that it was her intention to pay a round of wedding visits, and present her victim to all her former acquaintances—so rejoice in the prospect before you.”

Dr. Stirling’s horror at the sight he had witnessed was so genuine and ludicrous that we all laughed till we could laugh no longer.

“I was thankful to escape from the woman’s clutches,” he resumed, still wiping his forehead nervously, “and leave her to parade her doomed property up the street to the gaze of an astounded public. You remember how the female used to rail against matrimony, and denounce as fools and greenhorns all who were entangled in its snares? A really appalling instance,” groaned the doctor, “of the frightfully designing nature of woman! Under that seeming violent aversion to the marriage state, she concealed her machinations against man. The unhappy creature;” he spoke of him as he would of a condemned criminal; “is, I hear, a wine merchant in London, possessed—unfortunately for him—of a little money. The woman met him in town, I suppose,

ascertained his means, and then and there laid siege to him, and from sheer terror, you may assure yourselves, the misguided man fell into the snares of the griffin. It would have been considerably better for him in all respects had he tied a stone round his neck, and jumped into the Thames!"

"Fie, doctor! shall we never cure you of your ungallantry? And to think of Miss Grimston, after all her violent declamations against getting wedded, and her strongly expressed opinions concerning the misery of married people, falling into such an error herself," laughed Maude; "I really expected more strength of mind from her."

"Falling into error; Heaven help you!" growled the doctor contemptuously; "do you suppose that woman ever fell into an error in the whole course of her life? It was deep laid cunning, bless you, intense female art! However, you'll behold them in a day or two—bride and bridegroom, Lord help him!—and you'll witness about as lamentable a spectacle of the

noble animal man led captive by a female dragon, as mortal eyes ever looked upon."

The doctor was a true prophet. The new-made bride and bridegroom called next day, and he stood corroborated in all particulars. The bride in her bridal gear was even a more alarming person than in the old strait black garments, and the deluded Samuel was a melancholy spectacle of helpless captivity, a small, thin man, with scanty, light reddish hair, bewildered colourless eyes, and a frightened aspect generally, who sat during the whole of his visit sucking the top of his stick and casting glances of alarm and misgivings towards his bride, who sitting bolt upright, talked incessantly in the old sharp abrupt fashion, that always set my teeth on edge. She supposed that we were all dumb-founded on hearing of her marriage after all she used to say against folks tying themselves together like fools, and on our deprecating such an idea, cut us short by declaring that we needn't try to be civil, for she knew very well what we thought about it, which made us ex-

tremely uncomfortable. She then gave us a long and minute account of her first acquaintance of Sam here, of his stricken condition, of his proposal, and their ultimate "noosing," as she expressively called it, likewise all particulars of his birth, parentage, and pecuniary circumstances, the poor man eyeing her all the while with such despondent misery, that it was the hardest work in the world not to laugh.

Mrs. Fotherby expressed terrible indignation at George Tremordyn going out to convert the blacks, adding that there were blacks enough in England to convert, which was indisputable. The thought of that silly goose, Mary, going with her husband really put her in a passion, as if because he chose to be an idiot, and make a human sacrifice of himself by going out to be devoured by cannibals, that was any reason for her following him to be eaten too. She used not to think George a fool, but she had been deceived in him, and at all events there was an end of all expectations he might have had from her. Herewith, she rose to depart, and



giving us her address in London, briefly announced that if any of us came to town and chose to call on her, why there she'd be found, and so taking hold of her forlorn bridegroom, whose senses seemed in a perpetual fog of fright and mystification, led him off in triumph, leaving us to watch their progress down the avenue and laugh to our heart's content.

That afternoon, as I was sitting in my own room, busily employed on a frock for the little imperious rogue rolling on the carpet at my feet, Maude came running up stairs to tell me that Steenie had arrived. He had come by the morning coach, and had walked over from Haverford.

"And oh, Nell," said Maude, the tears of keen sorrow rushing to her blue eyes, "he says he has come to wish us good-bye; his going to Canada is settled at last, and he is to sail in a fortnight; how shall we part with him?—such a cruel thing it will be! And poor Jessie, and poor darling mamma, when the parting with Mary nearly

broke her heart! And he looks so wretchedly ill and unhappy," and Maude's tears choked her here.

"What can we do? Where is Jessie?"

"In my room; she ran upstairs as soon as she saw Steenie coming across the lawn. Mamma is on the terrace with him. Run down, Nell darling, and see if you can do any good. I'll look after Harry."

I hurried down to the drawing-room, heavy-hearted enough. Steenie and his mother were on the terrace; they walked up and down for a long time, while Charles and I watched them, she pleading earnestly, her hands clasped over his arm, her deep, dark mother's eyes full of strong affection and entreaty on his face. Could he keep his purpose under their influence, I wondered.

After some time they separated; he strolled down the avenue and she came in, with deep, anxious sorrow in her eyes.

"You must all try to keep him," she said. "Charlie, will you try? he is very fond of you.

He looks so ill—it will be terrible to think the sea is between us—I cannot let him go.”

Her troubled voice sunk.

“We will all try hard, mother, dearest. Cheer up and be hopeful.”

“Where is Jessie?” she asked, after a moment’s silence, and with an anxious look.

“She is upstairs with Maude.”

“I do not want her to go home,” Aunt Mary said quickly, and she left the room, leaving Charles and me to vexed and anxious musings.

Jessie did not go home: she staid to luncheon, but at luncheon Steenie never appeared, and all search for him over the house and garden was unavailing. Maude thought he had gone for a long walk.

The afternoon, bright August day as it was, glided on slowly and wearily. Poor little Jessie was pitiably restless, wandering up and down stairs, and flitting in and out from the drawing-room to the garden, like a perturbed spirit, making every now and then little nervous at-

tempts to sit down to her usual occupation, quite unavailing and sad enough to see.

Her ordinary power of quiet and self-command seemed to have forsaken her; her cheeks burned feverishly; she returned random answers to whatever was spoken, and her troubled glance went wandering everywhere, and finding no rest in earth or sky. I had persuaded Charles to drive out with his mother, and sat in the drawing-room with Jessie, not talking, for she was past that, but working and watching her, and dreaming vaguely and idly.

"Nell," she said at last, abruptly, breaking a long heavy silence, "I wish he was gone."

I looked up in amazement.

"You are surprised, but I do," she went on, restlessly, "it would be better than this. Better the quiet of a calm without hope than this long consuming fluttering heart-ache."

"Dear Jessie, be patient!" I knew not what else to say.

"I have been patient a long, long, weary while," she answered hopelessly.

I felt how true this was, and I had no earthly comfort just then to give the poor, weary child.

"He will wake some day, Jessie."

"Aye, perhaps, when I am fallen into the sleep from which there is no awaking. Here he is," she said, starting up, the colour flying from her cheek.

"Go out and meet him, Jessie."

"No, no, I cannot."

She hurried breathlessly from the room, and I went slowly out of the glass door to meet him.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Wandering," he returned with a smile, as he drew my arm through his. "Have you not a scolding waiting for me, Nell?"

"Indeed I have scolded you so often, and to no purpose whatever, that I begin to despair of you altogether."

"You are not far wrong, Helen," he said with a sigh.

"And why is it so, Steenie? Loving you as we all do—with such a mother as you have—such a home—so much affection lying at your

feet, why will you be so obstinately and ungratefully wretched?"

"I wish I could answer that query satisfactorily, Nell; it would solve all my difficulties. I met old Stirling just now, and he is outrageous at the notion of my going off to Canada, like a fool, to look for happiness when it lies at my elbow—the old tune, Helen."

"He is quite right, Steenie; you will not go, my dear brother?"

"It is too late now; I have settled everything," he said hastily.

"But everything can be unsettled again. It is cruel to your mother Steenie; it will break her heart to part with you."

"Nell, your words are powerful, and your dark, pleading eyes very hard to withstand, but I am not melted yet. We won't talk of it any more now, little woman, for I am really tired with travelling all night and walking all day, and need petting instead of scolding. Let us go in."

He looked so sad, worn, and weary that I had not the resolution to say any more.



As we entered the drawing-room, he paused with an uneasy start, and I saw that Jessie was there, standing with her back to us, by the fireplace, her clasped hands resting on the chimney-piece, and supporting her bowed head, with its drooping brown locks, so lost in her dreary musings, poor child, as never to have heard our entrance.

Steenie turned very pale. I pitied him then keenly, but a low murmur of words, almost unconsciously spoken, reached me from that drooping girl:

“Beyond seas! The cold, dim sea will lie between us, Steenie!”

He heard them as well as I, and a look of absolute anguish passed over his pale, handsome face, but Jessie had awoke with a start to the sense of our presence, and as she lifted her head, the hot pride of her woman's nature rushed to her wan cheek.

“I was talking to myself, I suppose,” she said with a faint attempt at a laugh. “I did not think any one was in the room.”

Steenie went up to her, and took her little trembling hand in his.

“You have not spoken to me to-day, since I first came, Jessie. Is it thus you keep your promise that we were always to be friends?”

She did not answer; she tried to withdraw her hand, but faintly.

“Let us part in kindness at all events,” he pleaded in a low voice; “the sea will lie between us soon, Jessie,” repeating her own words.

She started, and as in her vague distress and perplexity she turned her face towards me, I saw that she was deadly pale.

“The sea will be between us,” he said again, as if speaking to himself, trying to grow reconciled to the thought.

“Let us part now, at once, then,” Jessie answered quietly.

“A fortnight before the time.”

“Why defer it? It is better done at once, and over. Let us say good bye now, and I will try to think to-night you are already gone—a lost, departed friend.” She faltered here.

"How calmly you can say it. I cannot do so; my heart is sore and full of trouble, Jessie. But you are fortunate, you can say farewell quietly and without pain. I must try my strength. We must shake hands—friends always do—a hearty parting shake. Good-bye, Jessie."

"Farewell, Steenie. God bless you!"

She looked him in the face, her whole loving, long-tried, reproachful soul, shone out at her eyes.

"Not so, Jessie—thus."

He caught her—held her to his breast, and after one or two low, quivering passionate sobs, she lay there quietly.

"Thus, thus, Jessie, my little loving friend, my sweet, childhood's companion, my tried and faithful darling."

'His eyes will open when mine are shut for ever.' Not so, Jessie, they are opened now, and a clear true light shines through them, as he holds you to his heart, and his lips press your little pale, wan cheek.

“Forgive me, darling! forgive my blindness, my wilfulness, my folly—all your wrongs! Let me try to make amends for them, however imperfectly. Will you, Jessie, say you forgive me, let me hear the words from your little faithful lips.”

“Yes, Steenie.”

“Heaven bless them! Don’t run away, Nell, I’ll have you a witness of my humiliation and my pardon—have your dear sisterly heart to rejoice in my happiness.”

I was very, very willing to do this, and as I kissed him, in the fullness of my delight, and hugged Jessie, whose pretty face, lit up with all its old brightness, and sparkling with its glad hopes, was a winsome sight to see—I had seldom been happier in my life.

“What a bright fairy you are, my Scottish blue-bell, my heather-flower, tender and true,” Steenie said, as he drew her close to him again, and she laid her brown locks on his shoulder, in the quiet fullness of her intense, childlike happiness, and rested there, “and what a blind fool

I have been. Will you have me, Jessie, maimed as I am—with this empty sleeve of mine?"

"E'en sae," answered Jessie, a bright smile rippling the quiet tears that trembled in her blue eyes. "And what will my mither say."

"And mine?"

"You will not go to that weary Canada now, Steenie."

"Not unless you will go with me," he said with his old smile.

"That I will not indeed. You shall e'en stay at hame in your ain countree, like a douce, christian man."

"Amen, little woman, I have no will but yours now. You shall lead me with a hair of your brown tresses, Jessie. Won't you let me put back on your little finger the poor blue ring you returned so contemptuously that night in Russell Square?"

"Ah, we will not talk of that now," said Jessie, a shadow coming over the sunshine of her face at the memory of that miserable time.

"No, we will forget the past, our future lies

before us to amend it; for these glossy brown locks that rest upon my shoulder are those of my true and patient love; soon to be my winsome wife. Eh, Jessie? And here come wheels, bringing my mother; will she approve of her new daughter, think you?"

The carriage stopped, and I ran out in a breathless state to pour forth to the astonished ears of Aunt Mary and Charles that all was right, and Steenie was not going to Canada, and then left him to his mother's delighted embrace, while Jessie, before they had time to see her, darted upstairs like a lapwing, most likely to clasp Maude round the neck, and cry and kiss away the coolness between them, and falter out in a tempest of joyful tears, the marvellous news.

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"And Steenie's not going to Canada after all, bless you," said Uncle Edward, glancing all round the room that evening, with a glowing face of triumphant fatherly delight, as he kissed first Jessie and then Aunt Mary, and nodded at Mrs. Macdonald, who sat in a delicious state of felici-



tation, and with even her cherished knitting lying neglected on her lap, casting glances of loving pride, with dimmed eyes, from Steenie to her winsome bairn, "little Jessie here won't let him; eh, lassie? Blush and laugh as much as thou likest, it becomes thee! He's tied fast now, Mary lass, never fear, and a good thing it is for him, and so give me thy hand, Steenie, lad, and God's blessing on you both!"

"Aye," said Mrs. Macdonald, between laughing and crying, "and we'll e'en hope it'll be granted, and I trow it isna' sair to find, gin they wad seek it aright, and sae may the Lord preserve them baith! for I maun say that Steenie's a lad after my ain heart, and that he willna' hae to repent o' his bargain, for my lassie is a gude bairn and a bonnie."

And good and bonnie did Steenie find his little wife, and never, I believe, for one hour has he had cause to rue the day that swept aside the cloud between them. He seldom complains of his arm now, for Jessie is his right hand in the fullest sense of the word, and the brightest and

tenderest, and happiest-hearted of little women, that ever soothed a restless hour or gladdened a weary one.

They live chiefly in Scotland, which Steenie has always had a great love for; and Mrs. Macdonald is gone to dwell near her lassie, and nurse her grand-children, and end her days in her "ain countrie," the most contented and sweet tempered of auld leddies. We have long visits from Steenie and Jessie, and I don't think they are the less happy for the shadow that Annora's grave casts at times over his spirit, or for the shining curl that he still keeps as a precious relic.

## CHAPTER XIII.

TWO more years flowed quietly away like a still stream, through sunshine and shade, and Aunt Mary's grand-children began to muster thick about her, and to make her feel old, as she said, with the smile that was always young; for a little girl was born to me—a little, dark-eyed, quiet, delicate thing, very like her father, and a great darling of his. I called her Mary, the name we both loved so well, and Mary the third rather usurped her brother's throne, I fancied, as pet of the house, with everybody save Uncle Edward, who, though he loves her very dearly, seems to bend the whole energies of his mind to the task of spoiling my round, rosy boy, with his crisp curls and red cheeks, and laughing dark

eyes. At two years and a half the rogue's promise of future greatness was strong as ever, for a more powerful genius for noise I never witnessed. At this time, he is, literally speaking, never quiet. All his visits to the drawing-room prefaced of course by decorous promises, after a little delusive trifling with unprofitable bricks that won't build a house fit to live in, or picture books, which are but dumb things after all, and which he discovers doubtless to be vanity, invariably end with his stretching his full length on the floor, kicking about with small regard for decorum a pair of very stout little legs, and shouting most ridiculously, for the sheer pleasure of hearing his own voice, which misdemeanours ultimately lead to his expulsion.

Still he is a bewitching rogue, and when he creeps softly up to me, and lays his curly head in my lap, and looks up into my face with his large, dark, mirthful, honest child's eyes, it is hard work to be angry with him. Little Harry, what a dim far-away vision are those days now,

when I look upon you in your prime of strength and manhood, with children round your knees!

Lucy Esham was an intense admirer of my Harry, and was wont to endure most philosophically his ruthless rumpling of her silken flounces, and his favourite device of pulling down her dark braids, all over her shoulders, as well as his taking complete possession of her whenever she came to pay us a visit, which was generally about twice a year. She was the same kind, clever, wilful original as ever, with the same warm friendliness for me and mine, the same cold mien, and proud, indifferent voice, and tender woman's heart. I knew now by experience the jewel under the ice, and valued it as it deserved. I had a very sore objection then to the thought of Lucy fading into an old maid, for which fate I considered her much too good, and this gave life to frequent friendly skirmishes between us, whenever she came to Holmsley, I urging her to get married, and she laughingly retorting that she never intended being guilty of such weakness.

“Why, Lucy?” I argued one day, after a hot contest, as she and I strolled up and down the terrace together, the August air heavy with the scents of harvest, rustling in our faces.

“Because, Nell, marriage to folks like myself appears to me a ridiculous and unprofitable thing. To little, good, simple-hearted, happy souls like you, it may be the opening door into a region of delight, but to me I am afraid it would be as flat and stale as most other things in this respectable world. I should grow immensely tired of sitting opposite the same face all the days of my life, and have an idea that I should feel extremely uncomfortable, and, moreover, despise myself a little in bridal white. Besides, Nell, I am too faded a worldling to be a good man’s wife; and to be that of a mere coxcomb or rake, such as I meet daily, I have no ambition. What is to be done in such a case, little friend? If I ever marry, it will be for the sake of independence, to escape from the dominion of Victoria and that odious old nobleman of hers, with his carnation face and brown wig; and then



there must be money likewise, for Lucy Esham has next to nothing: so you see, Nell, there are unnumbered difficulties in the way of accomplishing your desires."

"Chiefly of your own creating," I said with some vexation.

"Well, as you will; but I am best as I am, little woman. How do you know whether in that green land of wedlock, all kinds of snares and pitfalls might not lurk for me? I fancy the barren path of spinsterhood the safest of the two, for me at least. Besides, honestly, Nell, I never yet saw the man that drew from me the homage of a second thought, except your husband before you married him—poor, interesting Charlie, with his melancholy blue eyes, eloquent of heart-suffering—and don't be jealous, for that was a most platonic 'regard;" and she laughed carelessly. "How strange it is now to think of those old days! Bye the bye, Nell, did I ever tell you that a man was silly enough to propose to me just before I came down here? nay, don't brighten up so, and open your inquiring

dark eyes so wide, for nothing came of it. The perpetrator of that act of weakness was Colonel Cramworth, a cousin of Victoria's extremely unpleasant old lord; but, I am bound in fairness to state, bearing no points of resemblance to his elderly relative. He was rather a handsome fellow, manly, straightforward, and honest, come home on sick leave, and going back to India to join his regiment."

"Oh! Lucy, I am so sorry! What did you say?"

"I told him, Nell, in friendly fashion, that he had made a great mistake, which he might have had to rue bitterly. I think I explained this to him satisfactorily, for ere we separated he seemed quite convinced of his error. But we parted excellent friends, and a week ago I heard he had sailed for India. I think I gave one sigh, Nell, no more."

"You are a strange being," I said in my perplexity.

"Very strange," with her old light laugh, "much too strange, Helen, to link my lot to any

rational Christian's, much too strange to make a good man happy. And now no more of it, little friend. You must let me be Aunt Lucy, Nell. I am commencing practice already with that impudent little rogue of yours. I see him in the garden yonder in great wrath with Peggy as usual. I must go and make inquiry into his wrongs. And there up the avenue come winding Maude and her curate, reading marvels in each others eyes. They are the prettiest, silliest pair of lovers mine ever looked on, though I doubt he is a scholarly young divine everywhere but under the immediate influence of her roguish smiles, and is really brilliant in the pulpit. Marriages are a natural production of this soil, Nell, if I come here often, I shall be driven to the error myself by sheer force of example. I see another wedding looming in the distance, and not very far off."

It was not hard to see that. My little bright loving sister's rebel heart was captured at last, and Dr. Stirling's old joke that she was waiting for him, silenced for ever. The fortress had

surrendered at discretion, and the victor was the Rev. Arthur Moore, Mr. Tremordyn's successor, a handsome young man, rather quiet and reserved—which is all the better for such a wild pretty thing as Maude—with a pleasant voice and an earnest manner, and qualities that won the hearts of all his parishioners within a month of his coming among them—Maude included. And that little lady has suddenly become deeply interested in parochial affairs, and indefatigable at the school, and has taken a sudden dislike to balls, and avows that red coats and their wearers are very tiresome things, and is much given to solitary rambles, where she and the curate have a wonderful knack of falling in with each other, leaving their friends to draw what inferences they please—which are not very difficult. And we are all glad to think that our bright Maude will be settled at the pretty rectory house, Mary's old home, with its old fashioned garden, and thatched roof, and nodding roses, to light up the melancholy rooms with her beauty and gladness, and bring back a pleasant memory of old times.

And here my brain reverts to vexed thoughts of Lucy's perverseness, but she comes up to me with my Harry, captive in her arms, his curls on her shoulder, and his roguish eyes still wet with the tears of his late tribulation, laughing up into her face and I think what a kind, friendly, handsome, haughty face it is, and what a strange inward history and what a troubled breast beneath its mantle of pride, and I knew that we shall be always real and faithful friends.

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My next memory is of an October night, wild and eerie, a ghastly, flying moon, glancing out from black, broken vapours, filling the troubled heavens with white light, now as the broken clouds flew over her face, shrouding them in intense darkness; while the wind went by with a moaning rush like the cry of spirits. Always, as this night comes round every year, there is to me a gloom in the heaven, and a darkness on the face of earth, a lamenting wind, and within an oppressed, troubled heart.

Charles and I were alone in the drawing-room

and I had been singing to him, but I felt disturbed and restless, and my brain was filled with drear forebodings, and dim, distressing fancies, I could neither escape nor account for. That wind going by was so mournful! As though some spell were on me, all the songs I tried were melancholy ones, and all ended by dying away in broken notes, till Charles began to rally me for my nervousness.

“Nell, darling, those plaintive, broken murmurs are really piteous echoes of that dismal wind without! What ails you, little wife?”

“I don’t know, I am nervous to-night, I suppose, and that wind makes me shiver,” I said, as another long, wailing rush passed the window, and moaned off into the darkness.

I could play no longer. I shut the piano and went towards the fire, and Charles for comfort, but as I leant my head on his shoulder, and marked the pale, spiritual face, more so than ever of late, and the white, almost transparent hand that smoothed my hair, some mysterious dread of losing him, which sometimes oppressed me



now, mingled with the dim foreshadowings of my unquiet brain.

"You don't feel ill to night?" I asked with vague anxiety.

"No, darling, rather well for me. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know—I fancied——"

"All sorts of dismal things, no doubt. What a little brain it is for phantoms: Do I look more particularly ghostly to-night, Nell?"

"No, indeed, I am very foolish."

"Are you thinking what a bewitching little widow you would make?"

"Charles!"

The light words spoken in jest, brought me an icy shudder.

"I was only joking," said he, drawing me closer to him. "Would you be sorry to lose me, my lily?"

"Will you tell me why we are talking of such gloomy horrors?"

"I cannot tell; I suppose your nervousness has infected me, Nell. Why do strange shadows

sweep over our spirits at times, smiting us with an unseen arm? Who can say? perhaps to remind us that we are tenants of a house decayed."

"Charles, I wish I could see my mother."

Strange that these words should have risen so suddenly, so unconsciously to my lips!

"My darling."

He had no comfort for me but tender words, as he laid his lips on my forehead, and held me closely.

"Will not my love do, Helen?"

"It is very precious, Charles, but—but is it not wofully strange never to see my mother—never to hear of her—never to show her my children—that such a broad, fathomless, shadowy gulf should lie between us?"

"Wofully strange, drearily inexplicable, my dearest; but you are not sobbing, Nell? You wring my heart, I cannot bear to hear you—are you ill to night?"

"Hark! there is some one coming."

"How you start and tremble, darling, it is only Grace."

It was the poor girl who had been so faithful to Annora in her adversity, and who now lived with me as a nurse-maid to my children, who came slowly and doubtfully into the room. She had always a timid, hesitating manner, like one whose spirit had been broken by the pressure of sorrow and want.

“What is it, Grace?”

“If you please, ma’am, here is a woman wanting to see you,” she said, in her slow, frightened way.

“A woman! here is a mystery ready for you, Nell,” said my husband, laughing.

“Who and what is she, and whence does she come?”

“She has come a long way she says, Sir, from —shire: she is very anxious to see mistress.”

“My mother! my mother must be ill—dying,” I cried, running to the door, shivering with an awful terror.

“See her here—call her in,” Charles said, hurriedly.

“No! no, shew me to her—where is she?”

Grace ran before me and opened the parlour door, where she said the stranger had asked to be shewn. There was no one in the room, but she, standing, a muffled up figure, in a large shawl and close bonnet, by the dull light of one candle and the dying embers of the fire. She turned her face to me as I entered, and my heart beat thick.

It was Susan, my old nurse. Connected as she was with that dreadful night years ago, when I learnt my shameful story, with that drive through the darkness, with that weight of agony crushing into my brain, and the mocking wind moaning in my ears, with the shadowy room at Haverford, and my mother's voice telling to her child the history of her own guilt, with all the dreamy horror of that time. I shrank from her with something like fear.

I think she saw this. She spoke in a low, confused voice.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brotherton, for coming here like this, at night, and in this strange way; I hope you will forgive my liberty, ma'am."

"You must not speak to me like that, Susan. I do not forget old days—how kind you used to be to me," my breathless anxiety prevented my saying more.

"God bless you, Miss Helen! I always loved you, and your sweet face is very little changed. But we musn't talk of old times now; they are gone for ever, worse luck. Mrs. Raymond is very ill, ma'am—dying I am afraid."

She paused, and I looked at her in breathless, freezing terror.

I gasped as if for air; I felt choked.

"Oh, Miss Helen, dear, don't take it so to heart. I did not think you would; I oughtn't to have told you so quick! Sit down, ma'am, let me fetch you a glass of water."

"No, go on. Did my mother send for me?"

"No, indeed, she didn't even know of my coming. She'll be a proud, haughty lady to the last, poor soul, though she's had woes enough to break her spirit, God help her! But she has been ill now for a long time, and latterly she's sunk so low that anybody may see she's not long

for this world, and I know you'd be loth, Miss Helen, for her to die alone, leastways with only me—and so without her knowing—I came to tell you. I thought that now, perhaps, you'd forget the past, and—”

“You were quite right, Susan. I am so glad, so grateful, to you for coming; I love you so for never forsaking my poor, poor mother.” My rushing tears stopped me here.

“Don't cry, Miss Helen; I can't bear to see it. We've gone back into the old house now for this month past, for she says she must end her days there. She's quite lost the use of her limbs, they seem palsied like, and she never leaves her bed now, and she shuts herself from all people that would be kind to her, and won't see a living soul but myself. And Mr. Clement's ship can't reach England for more than a month yet, she says, and my mind misgives me she'll never live to see him. Poor thing, her brain must be well nigh crazed, for all she's so cold and proud even now, for she tells me every morning that she has been talking with the dead all night, which is fearsome to hear.”



It might be. Who shall say, that in the stillness of night, in the shadowy room, the dying woman did not talk with spirits?

"I will come with you, Susan; we will start early to-morrow morning. God bless you for coming to tell me!"

"My dear young lady, I have thought two or three times lately, when she's been lying in a half sleep, that I've heard her whisper your name."

"Oh, mother, mother! I will go, Susan; I shall be ready at daylight. You must sleep here; Peggy will find you a bed. I will tell her you are my old nurse, whom I used to be so fond of. Go down stairs and get something to eat; you must be tired, poor thing! I am so grateful to you."

I hurried away breathlessly from her, to tell Charles of what I had heard, of the journey that I must take, to look upon my mother once again ere the gates of the silent city shut between us. It was hard work to persuade him not to go with me, and it was only when Uncle Edward insisted on taking care of me himself, that he reluctantly gave up the thought.

## CHAPTER XIV.

WE started at daylight, in Uncle Edward's carriage for less delay. In the dim, hazy October morning, I set out on my strange, mournful, journey.

The silence and the shadow that veiled the stately, handsome lady were lifted at last, and under them lay a dying woman, with her cold, marble face, unrelenting to the last. With the grey shade of death upon it, would it wear any other look than that of its still unflinching pride?

I well remember that journey; it is one of the clearest of these old memories of a long life; under the grey, melancholy sky, the yellow leaves drifting slowly down in every faint breath of wind, and crackling under the horses' feet, and

my sick, throbbing heart ever yearning and stretching forward to the end; the old, desolate home, and the hushed death-chamber.

I remember reaching at night the old, well-remembered town, with its familiar streets and houses, sleeping, or rather passing, the time of darkness at the inn, and setting forth for the old manor-house the next morning.

I remember driving through the bare meadows and misty lanes, and woods burning in their autumn robes, through all the well-known haunts and familiar places of my childhood, filling my soul with heavy regret and insufferable pain; by the churchyard where the red leaves were floating down over Annora and her father's graves, till I reached the old house, and saw it shut up and frowning darkly upon me, a stranger and an out-cast.

We passed through the neglected grounds, of old so neat and trim, and vocal with perished voices, now sharing in the general ruin; I clinging to Uncle Edward's arm, hiding my face behind my veil to shut out the look of ghostly

desolation that made me shiver as from intense cold.

A slip-shod servant girl opened the door to us, and stared bewildered at the unwonted sight of strangers. In an answer to a whispered enquiry from Susan, she muttered, still casting amazed eyes at us between every word, "much worse; the doctor have just gone, and says as how it'll be a wonder if she lives out the day."

Her low, awe-stricken tone fell upon me like a weight of ice.

I had expected nothing else, but still it seemed dim, unreal, unspeakably awful. The presence of Death, the shadow of his wings over the old, ghostly, deserted house, made me quiver with dread, and cling closer to Uncle Edward's arm for support.

We were shown into the gloomy, darkened dining-room, where the servant girl, still staring at us, took down the shutters to admit light, and Susan, whispering that she would return in an instant, left us to wait.

Presently she came back, with a stealthy foot-

step, and a paler face than before, and taking my cold, trembling hand, led me like a child, whispering a few kind words, of which I understood nothing, up the broad, dusky staircase, and through familiar passages, cold and bare in the grey light of the autumn day, to the room where she I had come to seek lay dying.

How well I remembered the mother's room, which, in my childhood, I had always entered with shrinking awe; the high, old-fashioned windows, looking out in the garden and meadows beyond, the dark furniture, the great stately bed, with its massive cornice and heavy hangings, which always struck me as a grim, appalling thing, that I would not have slept in for the world.

And I remembered well the image, whose ruin lay now on that bed, the wreck of the stately, handsome lady, a white, wan, haggard, dying woman, with pinched and sunken features, cold and hard still in the old indomitable pride, and with the old fire in her dark eyes.

She lay with her face turned toward the

window, and a glimmer of cold light from a rift in the grey sky fell full on its white emaciation.

Susan moved softly towards the fire, and began to stir it, with a hope of rousing her attention.

"Who's there?" said the old, proud voice, so changed and hollow.

"It is me, ma'am; the fire was getting low," Susan answered, giving me a troubled glance as I stood, white and trembling, near the door, my mother's face being turned from me.

"It is dying out like my life; let it be," said the failing voice.

"You are not cold, ma'am? I am glad of that."

"It would be strange if I were not, when the icy hand of Death is on my heart. Very, very cold!"

I yearned to speak to her, to call her by her name, but my voice died in my throat, my lips could not utter the words I wanted.

"There is some one else in the room," said the dying woman, raising herself a little with painful difficulty. "I heard a sigh just then. Whoever



you are," she raised her voice a little, "mortal or spirit, come out into the light, I do not fear you."

All the pride of her haughty soul was in these few words.

"It is no spirit, ma'am; it is your daughter—your own child," faltered Susan, the tears running down her face.

"Helen Raymond? I thought so, I felt her presence. Let her come here."

I came round to her side. I took the cold passive hand that rested on the bedclothes. I kissed the white lips and marble face.

"What is this?" she said, looking at me even then with almost a frown: "where do you come from? who sent you here?"

It seemed she had never missed Susan, nor inquired the cause of her absence.

"I heard you were ill, mother."

Even at this awful hour the word came shrinkingly to my lips; I had never from my infancy spoken to her words of affection or endearment, and now they seemed a mockery.

"I am more than ill; I am dying!"

"Will you forgive me now, mother, the sin of my childhood?"

I still held the cold, attenuated hand, but its fingers never closed on mine with any pressure of kindness.

She looked fixedly at me, and a momentary spasm of pain—gone in an instant—contracted her wasted features.

"Child, on my death-bed you need not mock me! Will you forgive your mother the sin of your birth, your inheritance of shame, the wrongs a long life has accumulated on your head?"

An untold agony trembled in her cold voice as she said this.

"It is all forgiven, mother, long, long ago!"

Susan had quietly stole out of the room, and we were alone. My mother withdrew her hand from mine as if its pressure was painful to her.

"That is well," she went on in a lower tone, "all love, I know, has long been dead between us; death is freezing my heart now, and I cannot

rekindle the ashes of a spent fire. I cannot wake up again the yearnings I have been striving for years to quench. My race is run, my dark, mysterious destiny marked out;" the quiet, proud despair in these words chilled me. "It is better so. But now that the shadows of the dark valley are closing over me, I would not go into eternity with the burden of a child's wrath on my soul. Love for any earthly creature is dead within me—dried, frozen up—but I would part in peace from you, poor girl, to whom my whole life, from the hour you first saw the light, has been one great wrong."

"Oh, mother, mother!"

I could say no more for my rushing suffocating tears.

"Hush! that word vexes me;" the old spasm again crossed her white, sharpened face, and her breath came short and painfully. I raised her into an easier position, and gave her the water she gaspingly asked for.

After a few minutes she revived a little, and

went on in a feeble, failing voice: "Your marriage portion has never been paid. It never can be now. I go into the world of shadows with that debt upon me."

Her voice began to quiver, and she spoke in short broken sentences; I shook with icy terror, for what seemed the grey shadow of the awful coming hour, nearer at hand than I dared to think, was stealing over her face.

"Never speak of it, mother, let it be forgotten for ever?"

"You talk idly; it cannot be forgotten," with a haughty rebuke in her trembling voice, "it will not be forgotten. It has haunted me like a phantom that will not be laid at rest for three years. There is another thing I would ask you; listen and don't interrupt me. More than two years ago I received money—I forget the sum, fifty pounds, I think—from some unknown hand. I could not return it, as I would fain have done, for I knew not the giver. Was it your charity?"

What an indescribable accent of scorn was there in the dying voice!

"You will not call it by such a name; it was not so meant. You will forgive it, mother?"

"Yes, poor child; there shall be peace between us now. Do I owe also to you the yearly sum that I have received from my banker in London, who pretended it was some old forgotten debt to the estate, and said that he was sworn to secrecy?"

"No; indeed, mother."

My thoughts flew to Uncle Edward—it must have been from him. God bless and reward him! said my grateful soul. She was silent for a while and lay still, her eyes, from which the old unquenched fire seemed slowly dying, fixed on the grey clouds, and the red leaves floating down from the old elms without. What thronging visions filled the dimmed brain then? Presently the emaciated hand began to quiver restlessly on the quilt, and I heard her voice again, low, feeble, changing more every instant, so that I had to bend my ear to listen.

"They told me you were married, I forgot—"

"I am married to Charles Brotherton, mother. I have two children."

“I never saw them; I never shall see them. I don’t remember your husband; I think I saw him once, as a young lad in delicate health. Don’t—” her words came in short, unsteady, quivering sentences, “don’t tell your children about me; don’t mention my name to them; let me be forgotten. It must be so,” with something of her old imperious tone. “Clement, Clement, why don’t you come? He is on the sea—his ship won’t arrive in time. He is married, he and his wife will live in the old house. Brighter days may dawn for it, when the doors of the grave are closed upon my dishonoured head.”

Never, never! No ray of light breaks through the gloom of thy fallen fortunes, ruined, dismantled home! She lies in a stupor for a few minutes, her white, sunken face, still with the ineffaceable stamp of its old haughty beauty, turned towards the dull glimmer of sun in the October heavens.

O fearful and unmistakeable change! O mother, on whose bosom I slept an unconscious child, is this you? O oppressive presence; O



awful shadow with the brow of gloom and the hand of ice, I fear you. I cry out wildly in my terror, and Susan comes running in. And the white lips are raised feebly, and the broken voice—unlike any I ever heard before—says: “Forgive me before I go, and kiss me, my child!”

They stiffen under my kisses, and there lies upon the bed, in the grey October light, awful and solemn, the ruin of the mortal house. And I hear as in a dream, Susan’s wailing over the dead, and Uncle Edward draws me tenderly away.

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He stayed with me at the old house till after my mother’s funeral, and I found time to bless and thank him for his kindness to the dead. She is laid in the old village churchyard, close to where her husband and Annora, my withered flower, sleep till the resurrection morning, and, I humbly hope, she finds peace. It was some years afterwards that I heard of my father’s death in Paris, and whether he ever mourned for the loving woman, on whose proud head he had brought ruin and

shame, I never knew; and my mother laid in the earth, I went forth from the desolate old house, and its doors shut behind me, to open never more.

A month after my return home, I saw in a newspaper the arrival of Clement Marsden's ship, and in a day or two Uncle Edward received a letter from him, asking for news of his mother. Everyone at home would think in their kindness that I was the fittest to give him the tidings, and so, after a sharp struggle with a painful shyness, I gained courage enough to go up to London, again under Uncle Edward's guardianship, for Charles was little fitted for long journeys, and proceed to the hotel in the Strand, where Clement was staying. And there we found him, surrounded with all the bustle and bewilderment of a return to England after many years' absence, when all the old familiar things look new and strange, with his wife, a pretty, fair-haired woman, in delicate health, very quiet and languid, and evidently a little fanciful, who seemed sorely puzzled to understand who I was,

and his children, a tiny baby, in the arms of a bewildered ayah, in white muslin robes, crooning over it some monotonous Hindoo song, and two small, pale, flaxen-haired things, a little older, who stared at me with frightened blue eyes, and cried when I kissed them.

Clement received me very kindly and courteously, though it was hard to find any traces of my childish playfellow and brother of old days, in this tall, handsome, grave man, browned by the sun of India, and with that indescribable un-English air always acquired by life in a foreign country. I wondered to see how calmly he received the tidings I brought him, for I had been simple enough to expect and dread a burst of frantic sorrow. He said he had long expected it, and it was better so; his poor mother's history had been a most strange and unhappy one, and that we ought to be grateful that her sorrows were over, and that she was at rest. Then he took my hand in a half-embarrassed fashion, and as if doubtful whether he ought to be so affectionate, and said in a way meant to be kind,

but which made me feel most painfully the gulf between us, "We are both her children, and are therefore united in our sorrow for her. He had great doubts," he went on to say, "about living in the old house; it would be full of melancholy recollections for him, and he doubted not very damp and gloomy, and quite unsuitable as a residence for Eleanor, who was very delicate, and had a great dread of the dullness of the country. The doctor recommended sea-air for her, and he was sure she would feel buried alive in the old manor. He had serious thoughts of selling the property."

The words sounded mournfully strange in my ears, and Uncle Edward, who had been chafing for some time, broke out indignantly about selling the house of his fathers; but Clement said coldly that such feelings were very well in their proper place, but that his wife's health and happiness must be his first consideration, and that the old house would always be a place of insufferably gloomy association for him; and that, besides, he should find looking after the property an immense deal of trouble and fatigue, which

neither he nor Eleanor had strength or energy of mind to subject themselves to.

So we left them, Uncle Edward glowing with indignation at the thought of the old home passing into the hands of strangers, and sorely lamenting that, since Clement was such a rascal to sell the old place, he had not the means of purchasing it; and I, chilled, sorrowful and disappointed, musing dreamily over the fall of my bright air castles; they had crumbled in ashes—in truth, never to rise more.

A few days afterwards Clement went down to inspect the home of his boyhood, which now called him master, and his visit confirmed his previous notions of it. He wrote to me that the house and grounds were in a half-ruinous condition, and would put him to much expense and trouble to make them habitable, that the place was clearly very damp, and insupportably gloomy, and that Eleanor was quite miserable at the thought of living there.

It was not so once, Clement, in our bright

childhood's days. It was a fair place then, but sin, and wrong, and shame, and the proud broken heart, that wore itself away within the old walls, have brought a gloom upon it! A shadow from the three graves on which the autumn leaves are falling, darkens its cold dismantled hearth. And thus it was sold—despite my pleading and Uncle Edward's indignant appeals, the old home was sold, came to the hammer, the old sacred rooms were laid bare to the profaning tread of strangers, the stare of cold, unfamiliar faces, the talk and jests of vulgar voices, to whom the joys, and sorrows, and memories of the old mansion were an empty echo of no meaning.

I believe some rich tradesman bought it; but I never asked or cared to hear. Clement and his wife went to live in Devonshire; we did not often meet, though perhaps as often as he wished, but when we did it was always kindly. And whose children now play and shout on the lawn at home, and gather violets in the old,



well-remembered woods, I know not, and have no means of knowing.

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But I am at home again, and my husband's hand is in mine, and my rosy Harry is clinging round me and shouting welcome, and my little quiet Mary's arms are round my neck, and what more do I need?

"And it's a blessed thing, Mary, lass," says Uncle Edward, as he seizes hold of Harry, and tosses him up to the ceiling, to my great terror and his infinite delight, "that Charlie made a fool of himself and got married, and has a wife and bairns to brighten up this old house. We should be a dull old couple, dame, if it wasn't for them, I'm thinking, for they're all scattered abroad now, and Maudie and her parson will be the next, I suppose. We owe a good deal to this black-eyed wench, Mary."

"A great deal," Aunt Mary answers, looking at me with her loving smile, "more than we can ever repay, God bless her!"

“And what do I owe to her?” says another and beloved voice, as the speaker draws me close to him, and his eyes of changeless affection look into mine, “what do I owe to the love that blesses and glorifies my fading days on earth, Nell, my sunshine.”

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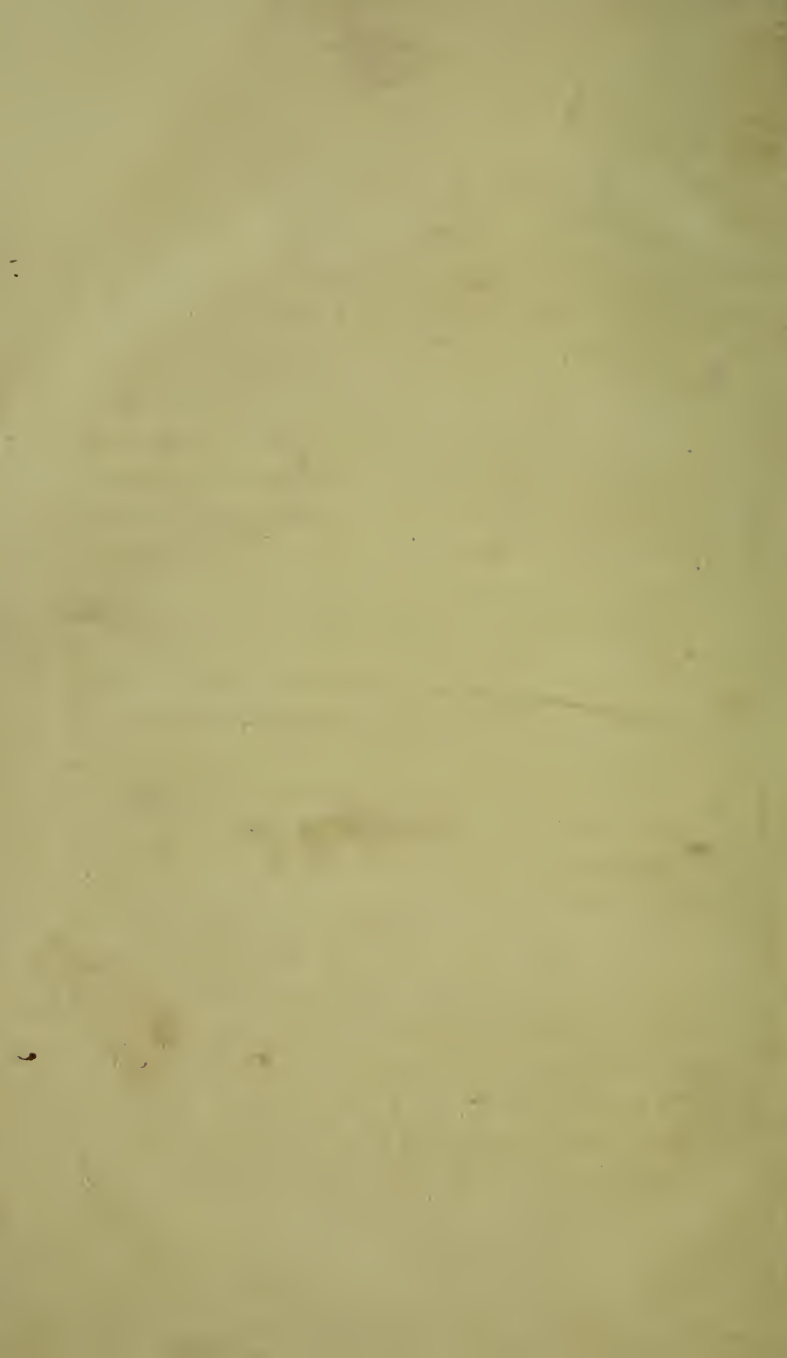
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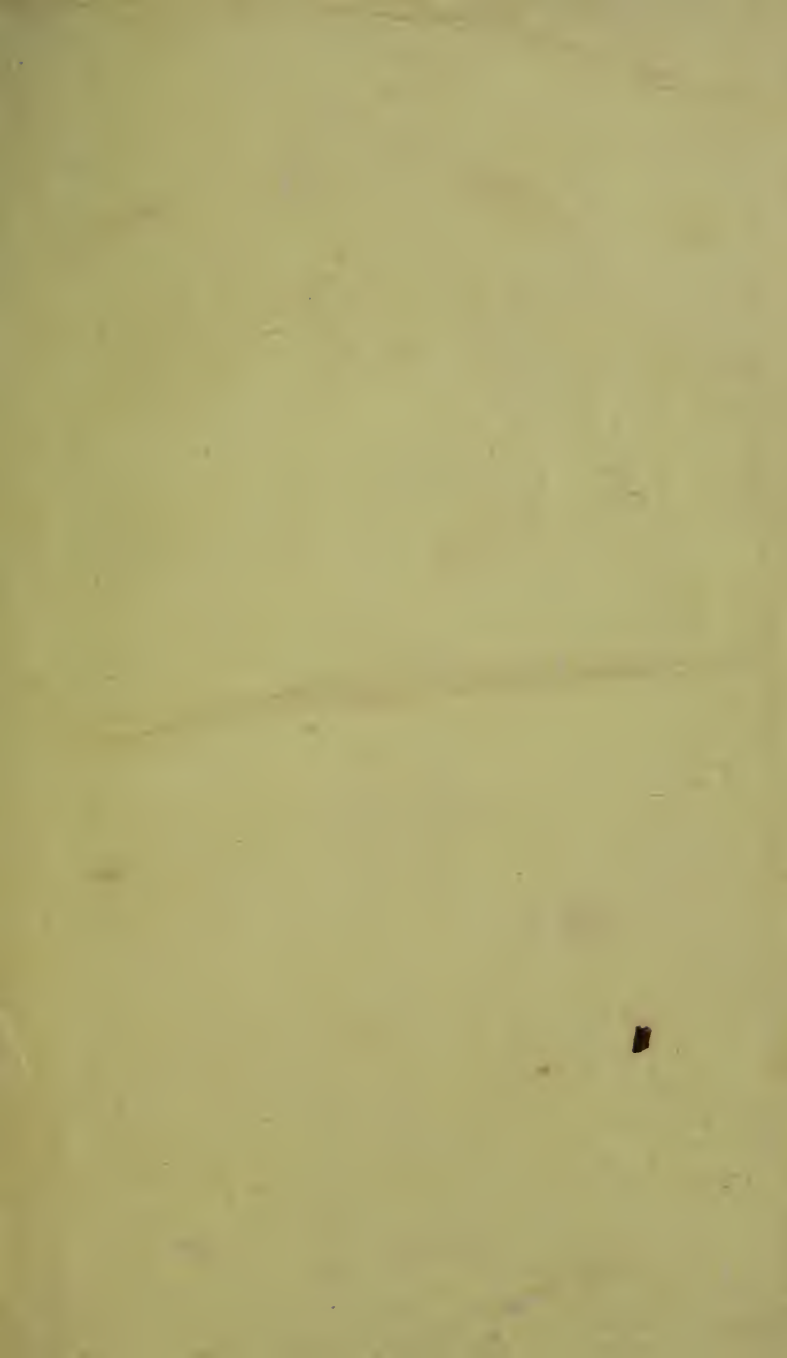
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He needs no sunshine of earth now. He is gone before me to where there falls no shadow of tribulation, and I am a grey-haired woman, and my son and daughter are married, And thus, oh friends! there fall around me the ashes of these OLD MEMORIES, and I sit in the calm shadows of evening, waiting for my summons, till, over the distant hills, breaks the light of the eternal morning.

THE END.







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